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Antisemitism in Europe reaching levels unseen in decades, says top Rabbi



By Maria Psara

EURONEWS (25.10.2023) - European Jews are afraid following a spike in antisemitic attacks sparked by the latest Israel-Hamas war despite authorities increasing protection, Rabbi Menachem Margolin, the chairman of the European Jewish Association, has told Euronews.

The Rabbi said the increase in such incidents, which include physical and verbal aggression, is something that has not been seen for decades.

"We do get a lot of information, a lot of calls, a lot of emails from Jewish people from Europe, both individuals in the institutions, synagogues, schools," Margolin told Euronews.

"People see in the street that they get much more remarks, many more bad looks, hatred, looks and call for death and physical incitement."

According to figures compiled by the Anti-Defamation League and released on Tuesday, nearly 590 antisemitic incidents have been reported to French police since October 7, when Hamas launched a deadly attack against Israel. In Germany, the number of such incidents has risen by 240% compared to the same period last year, while in Austria they have gone up by 300%.

Some of the incidents listed include the destruction of Israeli flags, the vandalism of Jewish monuments and sites, graffiti, and death threats.

The Rabbi said that many people are now taking extra precautions to protect their families from hate crimes.

"There are many, many people now who will secure their doors, install cameras, change the windows to bulletproof windows," he explained.

"They tried to fireproof doors and yet many people know it is not enough."

As the chairman of the European Jewish Association explained, the main tool for hate messages is social media. He wants better editorial control to be exerted over such content and for better education against racism.

The European Commission has raised concerns about the increase in hate speech and hate crimes targeting both Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe and has made their safety a top priority.

Germany and the EU in the dock at the OSCE on religious discrimination

OSCE (06.10.2023) – At the Warsaw Human Conference, Germany and the EU were jointly in the dock in a statement on religious discrimination made on 6 October by Ivan Arjona, President of the European Office of the Church of Scientology for Public Affairs and Human Rights:

“Madam Chair,

We would like to start by praising the efforts of countries such as Spain, Sweden, Netherlands, Portugal and the USA for their constant effort in improving the situation of freedom of religion or belief, and non-discrimination.

We would like to also acknowledge the Germany court system for the circa 50 court decision at different levels for ruling and recognizing that members of the Church of Scientology deserve and are entitled to the protection under Article 4 of the Basic Law.

We would like to address specifically to the delegation of the European Union, and more specifically to the Delegation of Germany, with special appeal for effective dialogue.

Do you still ask people to declare their religious belief before accepting them for a job, a public position or any other tenders that count with public funding?

Well, as of October 6, in the European Union's website for tenders by public bodies throughout the region, the EU is showing, without regret and without any corrective action, how Germany is asking in no less than 357 tenders in 2023, for bidders to declare that

- 1) they are not members of the Church of Scientology, and
- 2) that they will not hire Scientologists, based only in their religion, and this applies to clothes cleaners, kinder garden personnel, architects.

In addition to that this religious discrimination is backed by propaganda produced for example by the Bavarian state Ministry of Interior, depicting Scientologists as robots, dehumanizing us in a video aimed to be shown in high schools and publicly.

Would the European Union Delegation or even Germany be willing to start a dialogue to resolve this religious discrimination? Your answer to this will determine your position and level of respect of OSCE guidelines and international standards.

Our churches are open for you to carry out the needed dialogue. Thank you.”

Recommendations:

- Cancel the regulation in Germany that justifies the state- imposed obligation for citizens and companies to deny jobs and contracts to Scientologists, practice under the euphemist name of “protective declaration”.

Religious freedom in the context of a Free Trade Agreement

HRWF (21.09.2023) - On 19 September, the DROI committee held an exchange of views on the human rights dimension of the negotiations on an EU-India Free Trade Agreement. In preparation, the London Story Foundation has [compiled an overview](#) of evidence on religious freedom concerns associated with the India Free Trade Agreement, with accompanying recommendations.

Situation of religious minorities

41. India is witnessing a steep marginalisation and curtailment of rights of its religious minorities through laws, while political leaders actively incite further violence against minorities by engaging in hate speech.⁶⁸ In 2021, a panel of independent experts under the guidance of former International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda found credible evidence of crimes against humanity committed in India against its Muslim minorities.⁶⁹ The Early Warning Project in 2023 ranks India 8th highest risk of concern for mass atrocities against religious minorities among 162 countries.⁷⁰

42. In ongoing violence in Manipur, North-East India, over 120 people have lost their lives.⁷¹ This armed conflict started in May 2023 and has strong religious elements, with at least 250 churches being destroyed.⁷² On September 4, UN human rights experts issued a press release expressing their alarm over the scale of human rights violations involved in the Manipur violence and at the “inadequate humanitarian response” in its wake.⁷³ They said the situation was “grave” and pointed out that it has involved alleged acts of “sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, home destruction, forced displacement, torture and ill-treatment”.⁷⁴

43. There is evidence of widespread violence in India against people on grounds of protected characteristics, especially religion. Such targeted violence disproportionately affects religious minorities. Of over 19014 verified victims of communal violence, physical assaults, and lynching since 2017 (status: August 2022), the majority (86.7%) are Muslims.⁷⁵ Violence against Christians also rose by 81% between 2020 and 2021.⁷⁶ More than 2000 Christians were attacked and injured in the first nine months of 2021.⁷⁷

Additionally, Hindu supremacist groups have called for economic boycotts of Muslim vendors.⁷⁸

Identity of victims: Muslims: 16 477 – Christians: 1653 – Hindus: 183 – Other: 701.
Source: Foundation The London Story (2022)

44. India is systematically excluding its minority population in violation of religious freedoms enshrined in the ICCPR. The Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA) allows the government to fast-track asylum claims of irregular immigrants from specific communities.⁷⁹ The OHCHR called the CAA “fundamentally discriminatory in nature”, as it adds a religious criterion to citizenship and specifically excludes Muslims.⁸⁰ Home Minister Amit Shah announced that a National Registry of Citizens (NRC) would be conducted for the whole of India.⁸¹ In Assam, the NRC has already rendered 1.9 million citizens stateless.⁸² The NRC coupled with the CAA risks mass statelessness of Muslims and other marginalised groups, leading to mass protests across the country that were brutally quelled.⁸³

45. India grossly discriminates against its minority population through laws, in violation of the fundamental freedom of religion in Article 18 of the ICCPR. 23 out of 29 states in India have introduced laws criminalising cow slaughter, trade, and consumption of beef with harsh sentences.⁸⁴ In the state of Gujarat, the punishment for cow slaughter was increased to life imprisonment. Several BJP-ruled states have passed laws requiring governmental permission for religious conversion for marriage, which are justified with reference to the conspiracy theory that Muslim men trick Hindu women into conversion.⁸⁵ Such laws violate the right to family life (Article 23) and right to freedom of religion (Article 18) in the ICCPR. Such laws have also emboldened vigilante groups, who engage in extrajudicial violence against people from religious minorities in response to alleged violations of these laws.⁸⁶

Short-term risks

46. Worsening persecution of religious minorities places India at the risk of mass atrocities, which is already visible in the ongoing armed conflict in Manipur.⁸⁷ Violence against Muslim vendors, traders and business people, and calls for boycott against minority businesses, create potentially serious concerns for the consequences of increased trade moving forward.⁸⁸ Given that the EU does not traditionally consider religious minorities stakeholder groups in their human rights impact assessments, the risks for this stakeholder group are not yet known, and urgent research is needed to identify and mitigate potential harms. This lack of awareness can result in inadequate protection of the rights and well-being of religious minorities.

Recommendations in the context of the Free Trade Agreement

47. The EU and India should both conduct a comprehensive human rights and sustainability impact assessment (HRIA) before continuing further negotiations. The HRIA should consider the impact on vulnerable and often discriminated groups, especially on religious minorities. This should particularly examine the effects of economic boycotts of Muslims ongoing in India.

48. The EU and India should give explicit mention to the rights of gender, sexual, religious and ethnic minorities and caste-oppressed groups, as

minority groups all benefit from equal rights and protections. Otherwise, the mention of minority rights risks being a box-ticking exercise.

49. The EU and India should jointly commit to repealing discriminatory laws, i.e. laws that prohibit the free choice of religion under the guise of preventing involuntary conversions. Discriminatory laws that restrict the free choice of religion can be used as tools of religious persecution and violate the right to equality and freedom of choice.

Footnotes

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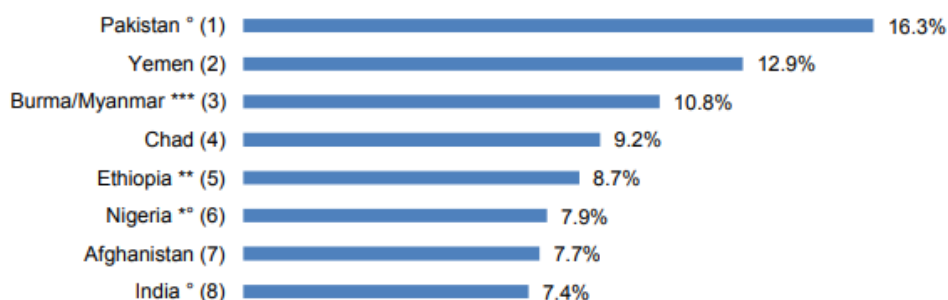
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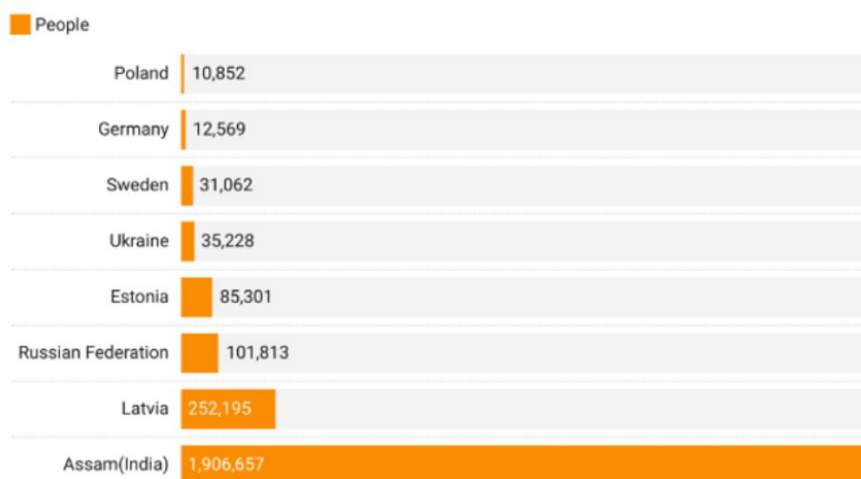
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Figure 2: Top 30 countries by estimated risk of new mass killing, 2022-23



Number of stateless people in different regions

Data for Assam from 2019



Source: Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015 (2016), • Created with Datawrapper

Source: Foundation The London Story (2022)

The 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB – a call to stand united

On 29 June, MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza, co-chairs of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the European Parliament, hosted a conference at the European Parliament to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The FORB Roundtables Brussels-EU and Netherlands as well as HRWF contributed to this event.

By Arie de Pater (*)

HRWF (29.07.2023) - Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a precious human right and the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB is definitely a reason to celebrate but also to reiterate the importance of the document. Also on behalf of the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID), I commend the EP

Intergroup on FoRB & Religious Tolerance for organising this event in the European Parliament.

The EU Guidelines on FoRB are a great example of cooperation between the EU Council and civil society. Ten years ago, I was the International Director of Advocacy for Open Doors and I followed the drafting process mainly from a distance as my colleague, Esther Kattenberg, was directly involved in the discussions both with EPRID members and other civil society experts, and with the Council. If my memory serves me well, I personally attended only one round table between the Council and civil society representatives. I was impressed by the cooperative spirit of all participants. Ten years later, I still appreciate the quality of the collective effort. Of course, the world has changed since the adoption of the guidelines and the opportunities for digital surveillance were not as prevalent and intrusive as they are now, but the guidelines are broad enough to address these issues. Therefore, I fail to see an urgent need to amend the guidelines. Let's implement them!

In the weeks and days preceding the 10th anniversary, EPRID organised two round tables to discuss the EU guidelines, including the need or opportunity to amend the document. Further, we held a brief series of online interviews with experts and practitioners. This culminated in an event in Brussels, featuring the EU Special Envoy for the Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union, Frans van Daele, and the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Nazila Ghanea as highly esteemed guests.

At the EPRID celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines, Mr Van Daele identified two main threats to FoRB: ignorance and indifference, and I could not agree more. Religious freedom is an important human right, not just for those adhering to a religion, but for all of us. FoRB grants us all the right to freely choose any religion or belief (broadly defined) without any coercion or interference of the state. When we lose sight on the importance of FoRB for all of society, we could easily lose the motivation to defend and promote this freedom, both within the European Union, and in our external relations. The limited interest in joining the EP Intergroup on FoRB, therefore, is reason for concern.

Awareness of the importance of FoRB is key in understanding the importance of the EU Guidelines and in implementing the guidelines by EU delegations abroad.

Policy discussions, including those in the European Parliament, have a tendency to focus on numbers and statistics. These are no doubt important, but figures do not really illustrate the day-to-day impact and importance of FoRB or the absence thereof. FoRB is not about numbers but about people. Therefore, it is important to share personal stories illustrating how life looks like without FoRB or when this right is violated. That's why reports like the Freedom of Thought Report by the Humanists, the World Watch List by Open Doors International, or the report of Aid to the Church in Need are important. Together, they present a broad and diverse picture of the importance of FoRB in various countries, situations, and backgrounds.

It goes without saying that these individual stories should be objective and well documented. They should be presented in context. Not all incidents involving believers are indeed FoRB violations. A fair representation and thorough analysis of all relevant facts is key. If we fail to get a clear and comprehensive picture of the situation, we will fail to come up with meaningful recommendations and strategies to address the situation. Nigeria might be a point in case. Especially in the middle belt, we have seen eruptions of violent attacks on people and villages and high numbers of casualties. When we present this violence just as a religious conflict, foregoing the economic elements involved, we'll miss the mark. But if we neglect the religious element and just focus on resources and economic factors, we'll equally miss the mark. Both one-sided analyses will

lead to ineffective strategies and therefore a continuation of bloodshed. They could make it even worse. That's why thorough monitoring, documentation, and analysis are so important when presenting cases of FoRB violations.

As I've stated before, FoRB is not about numbers and statistics but about people. There is no competition in victimhood. It should not matter whether the victim involved is a humanist, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Bahá'í, or a Christian. They are all equally important. We should all speak up against any violation of religious freedom, regardless the victim involved. EPRID, as a broad interfaith platform has a long history of standing united and I really appreciate that. Having said that, our solidarity is not limited to members of the platform. We are more than happy to work with others who are defending and promoting FoRB.

The EU Guidelines on FoRB have shown what we as civil society can achieve when we work together. We need each other to defend and promote FoRB, at home, in the European Union, and beyond. I call on all civil society actors to stand united, and to speak up whenever FoRB is threatened or violated, no matter the victim or the perpetrator. FoRB is not a privilege or a luxury. It is a human right. Therefore, I wish the EU Guidelines on FoRB a happy anniversary and an even happier future!

(*) Arie de Pater Brussels Representative of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) and European Representative of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF).

Religious freedom in the European Union, a USCIRF report

Muslims, Jews, Christians, and groups unfairly stigmatized as "cults" are increasingly victims of secularism and of a widespread hostility to religion.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (26.07.2023) - "The European Union (EU) and many of its member states are active in the promotion of religious freedom abroad, yet some EU countries have maintained or implemented laws and policies that restrict the rights of religious minority groups or impact them in a discriminatory manner. These unduly restrictive policies have the secondary effect of encouraging discrimination at the societal level."

These are the opening words of [a new excellent report](#) by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), published in July 2023. The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Its Commissioners are appointed by the President and by Congressional leaders of both political parties.

All European Union member states proclaim their support for religious liberty, the report notes, yet many do not respect it in practice, regarding it as a lesser right with respect to national security, the rights of certain non-religious minorities, a misguided notion of individual freedom, and some states' idea that citizens should not create "separatist" communities whose values are different from those of the majority. While France is often quoted in the report as a typical example of these problems, other countries are mentioned as well.

Different religious minorities are targeted. Both Jews and Muslims suffer because of prohibitions to wear distinctive clothing such as the Islamic hijab and the Jewish yarmulke in public places (some states also target the Sikh turban). Also, “Animal rights activists and politicians, albeit for different reasons, often advocate for ritual or religious slaughter restrictions throughout the EU. These restrictions systematically exclude Jews and Muslims from European society by complicating their ability to comply with religious dietary laws, forcing individuals to abandon deeply held religious doctrine.”

The Jewish and Muslim practice of circumcision is also under attack, particularly in Scandinavian countries. “Children’s rights activists contend that circumcision violates the rights of children, while certain politicians consider circumcision an imported, ‘foreign’ practice. Yet, circumcision is a fundamental Jewish ritual and campaigns to ban this practice negatively impact Jewish life.”

In France, the so-called law against “separatism” denies Muslims the right to self-organize their communities according to their own values, the report notes, and also impacts negatively on other groups, including those stigmatized as “cults” (in French, “sectes”).

With respect to the latter groups, the report adds “Several governments in the EU have supported or facilitated the propagation of harmful information about certain religious groups. For example, the French government has funded the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects (FECRIS), a French non-profit created in 1994 that has pejoratively labeled some religious associations as ‘sectes’ or ‘cults.’ Similarly, an official body under the French Ministry of the Interior...—the Inter-Ministerial Mission in the Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Derivatives (MIVILUDES)—releases an annual report that regularly disparages groups including Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Church of Scientology. The organization has partnered with government agencies, religious organizations, and civil society to inform them about so-called ‘cults’ and has generated largely positive reactions from French media outlets, which has in turn negatively impacted societal respect for those associated with religious organizations that MIVILUDES labels as sects or cults. MIVILUDES has also funded various NGOs that target religious organizations considered harmful ‘sectes,’ including the National Union of Associations in Defense of Families and Individual Victims of Sects (UNADFI) and the Centre Against Mental Manipulation (CCMM).”

Worse still, the report continues, “In January 2023, France passed a law, which, under Article 29, section 3.1.2., empowers authorities to use special techniques outlined in the criminal code to investigate ‘sectes,’ including through the impersonation of a delivery person, remote access to electronic communications, and the installation of recording devices in private or public places or vehicles.”

[Quoting “Bitter Winter,”](#) the report also mentions the discriminatory effect of German campaigns against “cults” (“Sekten” in German). “In some regions of Germany, potential employees or the recipients of government grants must sign statements commonly referred to as ‘sect filters’ to prove they have no connection to the Church of Scientology. In one case, a man was fired from a long-held official position for his affiliation with the Church of Scientology.”

Blasphemy laws are still in force in various European countries, and they may affect the right of atheists to criticize religion. Both laws against blasphemy and against hate speech serve the legitimate purpose of protecting religious communities and other minorities, the report notes. However, “legislation is often too broad, criminalizing speech

that does not amount to incitement to violence and thereby encompassing expression protected under international human rights standards, including the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.”

Christians may thus be targeted for maintaining and propagating their traditional doctrines on family issues. “From a religious freedom perspective, over-broad hate speech laws are particularly concerning when used against individuals for peacefully sharing religious beliefs that others find offensive or controversial. In one such case, in Finland, state prosecutors are appealing a case against Finnish Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and Evangelical Lutheran Bishop Jhana Pohjola, who were acquitted of hate speech charges for tweets that expressed religious beliefs about LGBTQ+ issues.”

Not surprisingly, official statutes and actions against religious minorities exposes them to hate crimes and private violence as well. “Despite official efforts to combat antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, both forms of hatred continue to rise. Meanwhile, the EU has yet to take commensurate steps to address other forms of religious discrimination that are also prevalent throughout Europe.”

The report argues that it should be “possible to guarantee freedom of religion or belief while balancing other concerns, such as national security”. It concludes that “While European Union countries generally have in place constitutional and legal protections for freedom of religion or belief, some have also enacted laws and pursued policies that systematically violate religious freedom and have a serious and disproportionate impact on the ability of religious minorities to live in accordance with their beliefs. Importantly, the continuation of such policies at an official level likewise encourages discrimination at a societal level and contributes to an environment that has seen continued violent attacks on places of worship and members of religious minority communities, encouraging increased emigration from Europe.”

While the European Union commendably protests when religious liberty is violated outside its borders, it is now great time for it to put its own house in order. The European institutions’ own credibility is at stake.

The EU Guidelines on FORB discussed at the plenary session of the European Parliament

MEPs tell EU Commissioner Věra Jourová that actions to protect religious freedom are far from enough

MEPs Hölvényi and Bert-Jan Ruissen tell EU Commissioner Jourova that actions to protect religious freedom are far from enough

[The European Times](#) (13.07.2023) - ***This Friday afternoon, the plenary session of the European Parliament addressed the issue of the EU involvement in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU.*** The participants included Commissioner Věra Jourová and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

Věra Jourová speaks at a debate on implementation of EU guidelines on FoRB

Commissioner Jourová, who is responsible for values and transparency, presented the views and actions of the Commission in this regard, highlighting the importance of respecting and promoting religious freedom. She emphasized that the EU is committed to protecting the rights of individuals to practice their religion freely and without discrimination. MEPs from various political groups took part in the debate and shared their perspectives on the issue. The most critical ones for the lack of proper action were MEP György Hölvényi and MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen.

Others emphasized the importance of dialogue and cooperation in promoting religious freedom both within the EU and externally. They highlighted the need to engage with religious communities and civil society organizations to address religious discrimination and intolerance.

György Hölvényi: "since 2021, people have been killed or kidnapped in 40 countries of the world because of their faith"

The free exercise of religion is primarily a human rights issue. Unfortunately, as the majority of EU decision-makers do not recognize the importance of this fundamental right for individuals and society, stated György Hölvényi, Christian Democrat MEP in the European Parliament's debate on Thursday, organized on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The vice-president of KDNP Hungary and Member of the European Parliament, reminded, various reports, scientific researches and field experiences show that we live in a time of unprecedented religious intolerance globally. About 84% of the world's population identifies with some religious community. Meanwhile, since 2021, people have been killed or kidnapped in 40 countries of the world because of their faith. We have to underline that the most persecuted religion in the world today is Christianity. During the last year, according to international surveys, 5,621 Christians were killed because of their faith, 90% of the murders took place in Nigeria.

According to the EPP Group's politician, the EU is struggling with a serious credibility problem: despite the dramatic situation, the protection of religious freedom is still not fully part of the EU's external action. Despite the increasing persecution, the European Commission, for example, hesitated for three years to re-appoint the EU Special Envoy responsible for religious freedom outside the EU.

Real milestones are needed in the dialogue with religious communities active in the EU and in third countries. Although the legal framework is in place, no structural dialogue actually takes place before substantive EU decisions are made. MEP György Hölvényi pointed out that the joint action against increasing religious intolerance around the world cannot be delayed any longer.

Bert-Jan Ruissen: "EU actions on religious freedom must finally get off the ground"

The SGP wants the EU to finally take real action on religious freedom. The EU guidelines on freedom of religion have been in existence for 10 years now but have barely been put into practice.

"That we have these guidelines is of course a good thing. But I have serious doubts about the implementation there," Bert-Jan Ruissen (SGP) said Thursday in an MEP debate he had requested.

In 10 years, the European Commission has never presented the promised reports or held consultations. The position of EU Envoy for Religious Freedom remained vacant for 3 years and support has always been very minimal.

"More really needs to be done, because religious persecution is only increasing worldwide," Ruissen said. "Look at a country like Nigeria, where 50,000 Christians have been killed in the last 20 years because of their faith. Or look at the Indian state of Manipur where many churches have been destroyed and Christians killed this spring."

On Thursday, the SGP therefore made three concrete requests to the European Commission:

- 1) Come up with a solid implementation report of the guidelines in the short term.
- 2) Give the EU Envoy for Religious Freedom a permanent mandate and provide additional staff so that he can do his job properly.
- 3) Come up with proposals to designate June 24, the date on which the guidelines were adopted, as the European Day for Combating Religious Persecution.

"We cannot leave the oppressed Church with millions of believers out in the cold," Ruissen concluded. *"I hope and pray that it does not drag on for another 10 years!"*

Some thoughts about public diplomacy for religious freedom

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



Conference organized by EPRID at the Baha'i Centre in Brussels with the participation of EU Special Envoy on FoRB, Frans van Daele (on the right), and UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Nazila Ghanea (in the middle). EPRID was represented by Francesco di Lillo (on the left)

HRWF (03.07.2023) - In Europe, freedom of religion or belief is generally treated as a poorer relation of the human rights family, even though its protagonists consider it to be the mother of all other freedoms: freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression; freedom of association; freedom of assembly; freedom to share and spread one's beliefs and to make new members. All these freedoms are not specific to the right to hold beliefs, whether they are theistic, non-theistic or philosophical. They are concomitant and intimately intertwined with other human rights.

At a conference organized at the end of June to mark the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Baha'i Centre in Brussels, the recently appointed EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union, Frans van Daele, stated that, on the one hand, the defense and promotion of religious freedom faces some major obstacles in Europe: indifference and ignorance.

On the other hand, EU institutions are fragmented, have their own agendas and must follow their own procedures, which makes it difficult to promote freedom of religion or belief in a consistent and coordinated way or to denounce violations of that freedom, let alone take steps to remedy them.

The UN also has its own institutions and mechanisms but collaboration between the EU and the UN is both possible and complementary, according to Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief who took part in the same conference

organized in Brussels by the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination.

In some countries, there are tensions between well-established majority religions and newly established ones but sometimes also with historic religious minorities because the state is identifying itself with the contemporary dominant religion. In such conditions, the European Union's public diplomacy has to promote tolerance, respect and non-discrimination through education, appropriate school and public education, according to EU Special Envoy on FoRB Frans van Daele. This EU vigilance strategy is already in place in countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with varying degrees of progress. The EU strategy is to promote a more inclusive society and to purge negative stereotypes concerning religious and ethnic minorities from the schoolbooks.

Another aspect of public diplomacy involves prioritizing the countries to be targeted, according to certain criteria. Frans van Daele contends that confrontation should be avoided with the selected country, as it is unproductive and even counterproductive. Priority should be given to countries whose centers of power can be considered open to the EU's message and which are ready to move in the right direction. Most countries that harshly repress the freedom of religious minorities and their members lack the political will to align themselves with international standards despite their formal commitments and are not prioritized in the EU's strategy.

The EU's public diplomacy is therefore highly complicated since it has to operate both within its own internal complex fragmented architecture and externally, through the political and social arcanses of the target countries where it has to identify potential leverages to be activated with some chance of success, or at least progress.

Human Rights Without Frontiers considers that, if the EU wants to do more and more efficiently, it needs to staff and to fund appropriately the EU Special Envoy on FoRB, the EEAS unit in charge of FoRB issues, the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the European Parliament, just to name a few of its advocacy mechanisms, but political will has been missing after the end of the mandate of the first EU Special Envoy.

10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief celebrated at the European Parliament

On 29 June, MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza, co-chairs of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the European Parliament, hosted a conference at the European Parliament to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The FORB Roundtables Brussels-EU and Netherlands as well as HRWF contributed to this event.



Photo credit: EU Brussels FoRB Roundtable – THIX Photo. — 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB co-organized by the Eu Parliament Intergroup on FoRB&RT, with HRWF, EU Brussels FoRB Roundtable and Netherlands FoRB Roundtable.

By MEP Peter van Dalen

Dear honourable speakers, dear guests,

On behalf of the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, I want to welcome you here today. Last Saturday, the 24th of June, marked the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. This is a very joyous occasion, as it shows that the fight for religious freedom has its rightful place on the European agenda.

Since this day in 2013, we have seen some important developments. One highlight, in my regard, is the appointment of the EU Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and the growing number of national envoys in the EU. Also, over the years we did manage to get some vital references to religious freedom in key reports of the European Parliament, such as the annual human rights report.

Yet, we have also been challenged. The utterly slow conduct of the European Commission when appointing the Special Envoy shows that religious freedom does not remain on the European agenda without a fight. That is why I am glad that you are here. There is a big and professional community here in Brussels devoted to advocating the cause of those that are put under pressure or even persecuted for what they believe, or don't believe. Your work is very important to us, MEPs, but more so to the people that you are advocating for.

The EU Guidelines that are the centre of attention today form a good foundation for EU action in defence of religious freedom. However, over the years we have also heard signals that their implementation sometimes leaves something to be desired. Therefore I am grateful that we can have this event today, to discuss how the use of the Guidelines can be further enhanced in EU external action. We have a number of great speakers, all with considerable experience in the field of religious freedom, human rights and diplomacy.

An OSCE/ ODIHR point of view of the EU Guidelines on FoRB

Paper presented at the conference held on 29 June at the European Parliament to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The FoRB Roundtables Brussels-EU and Netherlands as well as HRWF contributed to this event hosted by MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza.

By Kishan Manocha, Head of the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw



Photo credit: EU Brussels FoRB Roundtable – THIX Photo. — 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB co-organized by the Eu Parliament Intergroup on FoRB&RT, with HRWF, EU Brussels FoRB Roundtable and Netherlands FoRB Roundtable.

Introduction

Countering hate crime based on religion or belief Interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) Guidelines' inclusive understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of freedom of religion or belief, grounded in the key principles of universality, dignity, freedom, equality and non-discrimination, is in line with how freedom of religion or belief is framed in the political commitments agreed consensually by OSCE participating States.

Further, these 57 countries have also committed to combat anti-Semitism, intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, Christians, and members of other religions, and on preventing and responding to hate crime based on religion or belief. In pursuance of the

mandate given to it by the participating States, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the principal human rights institution of the OSCE, helps States implement these two distinct yet overlapping and mutually reinforcing commitments, namely to advance freedom of religion or belief for everyone and to advance tolerance and non-discrimination.

The EU Guidelines identify “Promotion of respect for diversity and tolerance” as a priority area of action in relation to creating environments conducive to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief for everyone. In light of ODIHR’s experience in helping to advance tolerance and non-discrimination in the OSCE region, I would like to share some thoughts on two areas that are integral to efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance, namely countering hate crime based on religion or belief, and promoting interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships.

Countering hate crime based on religion or belief

Hate crimes – including acts of violence, threats and property damage – threaten the security of the individuals and communities affected. Hate crimes are message crimes. The message is of inequality and rejection. They also carry wider security challenges because of their potential to undermine social cohesion, create divisions, and foment discord; if left unchecked, they can lead to wider conflict.

Hate crimes based on religion or belief are serious obstacles to the enjoyment by all persons of the right to freedom of religion or belief. The fear and anxiety they instil among individuals can also affect the manifestation of their religion or belief, eg wearing religious attire, attending places of worship, and celebrating religious holidays and festivals.

According to ODIHR’s 2021 Hate Crime Report, 56% of all incidents reported to it by civil society or intergovernmental organizations (3605 out of 6391 incidents) constituted anti-religious hate crimes, be they anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, anti-Muslim, or hate crimes based on other religions or beliefs. While most of these incidents have targeted property, such as places of worship, community centres or facilities, or cemeteries, 475 were violent attacks against individuals or threats. What we know is just a tip of the iceberg since the vast majority of hate crimes are never reported to State authorities or to any other third party. Research has shown that it is the lack of trust towards the State authorities and their capacities to respond to hate crimes effectively that partly explains such under-reporting.

It is therefore important that States take hate crime based on religion or belief seriously. A comprehensive approach is required to effectively tackle this problem. States should enact and enforce hate crime legislation that recognizes different grounds of religious intolerance as prohibited bias motivations and that is clear, concrete and easy to understand. Because religious intolerance is often expressed through coded expressions, particularly in the case of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes, it is recommended that a clear set of indicators for identifying bias motivation be employed by law enforcement; this should be kept under constant review in light of the nature of the incidents reported. States should also put in place systems, routines and training to ensure that relevant officials recognize religion or belief-related hate crimes and record them as such.

There are, of course, other practical steps that States, particularly through their law enforcement agencies, can take to meet the security needs of at-risk religious or belief communities, including in relation to their places of worship and religious sites. In so doing, it is important law enforcement invest in building trust on the part of religious or belief communities targeted by hate crime.

ODIHR has found that creating regular spaces for dialogue and exchange between communities and law enforcement where security needs can be identified and appropriate measures discussed helps build this trust as does the selection of dedicated liaisons or focal points for religious community engagement within law enforcement and enhancing religious literacy among law enforcement officials. It is also important that communities are treated as respected partners in the provision of their own security and that security measures are designed, implemented and reviewed in close consultation with the communities themselves. This will hopefully ensure adequate protection for individuals and communities but also mitigate against the potential risk of over-securitizing religious spaces, particularly places of worship and sites, with the adverse impact this may have on the overall enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

Interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships

Paragraph 34 of the Guidelines stipulate that the EU will “encourage state and other influential actors, whether religious or non-religious ... to support pertinent initiatives to promote an atmosphere of respect and tolerance between all persons regardless of their religion or belief”.

Although not explicitly spelt out in the Guidelines, it is only reasonable to assume that interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships would be included in this category of “pertinent initiatives”.

Interfaith and interreligious dialogue activities at all levels have emerged in many countries. In light of these and ODIHR’s own experience of contributing to efforts to initiate and strengthen interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships in the OSCE region, I suggest that the following points should be borne in mind when we consider how State and other actors can best support such efforts.

One, the reciprocal, potentially mutually reinforcing relationship between interfaith dialogue and freedom of religion or belief. Greater respect for freedom of religion or belief creates the conditions for interfaith and interreligious dialogue, and such initiatives, in turn, can facilitate greater respect for freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. Allow me to develop both these points.

Dialogue across religious and belief boundaries– basically, any interreligious communication – falls within the scope of freedom of religion or belief (as well as freedom of expression).

Dialogue initiatives should therefore be approached and carried out in a human rights perspective and guided by principles of inclusiveness and non-discrimination. Lesson learned from a diverse range of efforts suggest that regular encounters between individual and groups belonging to different religions and beliefs, if broad-based, inclusive, and conducted on equal footing, foster greater levels of understanding and tend to endure.

Open encounter and dialogue are of crucial importance for creating understanding, combating intolerance and negative stereotypes based on religion or belief, establishing common ground, and building relationships of trust and productive co-operation between people of different religions and beliefs. These conditions are conducive to the advancement of freedom of religion or belief. Even where partnership initiatives between people of different religions and beliefs do not explicitly focus on promoting freedom of religion or belief, they will do so anyway by promoting the mutual respect and understanding needed to sustain it.

Two, the role of the State. States do not have a monopoly on organizing or sponsoring interfaith and interreligious dialogue processes. Interfaith and interreligious initiatives can and should flourish outside state control or involvement. What States certainly can and should do is to create the conditions for meaningful interfaith efforts to take place by ensuring that the human rights of all are safeguarded, to promote such initiatives, and to support them through an adequate and sustained allocation of resources.

If dialogue is organized or otherwise facilitated by the State, then attention should be carefully paid to accommodating the full diversity of religious and belief communities, including non-believers, in society, not only those which are long-established, numerically large, or well-known. At the same time, States should scrupulously respect the voluntary nature of participation by religious or belief communities in interfaith and interreligious processes.

Three, there is no set format for interfaith and interreligious initiatives. They can take place in a range of settings and levels within a country (local, regional, national), be formal or informal in nature, time-limited or open-ended in duration. While formal interfaith dialogue initiatives taking place at the level of religious leadership or involving community representatives are quite numerous and well-established in many parts of the world, the role of grassroots, informal dialogue in promoting religious diversity and tolerance and respect for freedom of religion or belief has been less systematically explored.

By informal dialogue is meant communication across different groups or involving people that is not organized explicitly along religious or belief lines; this may include, for example, informal settings in multi-cultural and multi-religious neighbourhoods, schools, and clubs. Relevant actors – State, civil society, religious or belief communities – should consider how best they can support and strengthen spaces for informal dialogue and encounter across religious and belief boundaries (the so-called “dialogue of life”) so that they have a realistic chance of achieving a sufficient depth of conversations and relationships favourable to fostering religious tolerance and understanding.

Four, in light of their potential to make a distinctive and important contribution to interfaith and interreligious dialogue processes, the active participation of women and youth must be a priority for the organizers of such initiatives.

Women from various backgrounds are often involved in interfaith dialogue efforts at the local or community level; however, they face various obstacles in accessing and being a part of more formal activities at the national level, where participants are usually senior religious leaders who are predominantly men.

Young persons of faith, regardless of whether they occupy leadership roles, have a critical contribution to make to interfaith dialogue efforts; they are often very credible and effective communicators with their peers in local communities.

Clearly, the autonomy of religious or belief communities to choose their representatives in formal dialogue activities must be respected. However, as pointed out, these are not the only spaces in which meaningful interreligious communication and encounter take place. Therefore, when organizing informal dialogue efforts careful attention should be paid to engaging the equal participation of men and women.

Creative efforts also need to be made to systematically engage youth in interfaith and interreligious work; religious and belief communities and other relevant stakeholders should actively invest in developing the confidence and capacity of young people to participate meaningfully in such initiatives, whether in activities alongside older

individuals or in spaces specifically created for young people from different religious and belief backgrounds, including non-believers.

From the EU Guidelines on FoRB to “Religious freedom is not a second-class right”

Paper presented at the conference held on 29 June at the European Parliament to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The FoRB Roundtables Brussels-EU and Netherlands as well as HRWF contributed to this event hosted by MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza.

By Andrea Benzo, Special Envoy of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for FoRB Protection and Interreligious Dialogue.



HRWF (29.06.2023) - I would like to thank our co-hosts – the Honorable MEPs Carlo Fidanza and Peter Van Dalen, along with Mr. Willy Fautré – for their kind invitation.

Today's event provides us with a much timely and needed opportunity to discuss how to strengthen our common commitment to the protection and the promotion of freedom of religion or belief as this universal right is under increasing pressure globally.

Last week, the Italian Embassy to the Holy See hosted the presentation of the 16th Report on religious freedom in the world by the international NGO "Aid to the Church in Need". In her message for that occasion, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni made a very powerful statement and stressed that "*religious freedom is not a second-class right*".

There are a number of considerations that we should draw from these illuminating remarks.

First, we are reminded of the interrelatedness, interdependence, indivisibility and universality of human rights. If FoRB is restricted, the whole set of human rights a person is entitled to will be consequently under pressure. Such view allows us to grasp all possible forms of religious discrimination, both visible and hidden ones.

Secondly, the promotion of FoRB is a universal value and a common heritage of all humanity, not a Western concern, as some try to portray it. Therefore, FoRB should not become hostage of a "West vs the rest" pattern. Rather, it is one of the fundamental prerequisites for stable and prosperous societies, which is the ultimate goal of any country across cultures, religions, and geographic boundaries.

Given the importance of FoRB as a crosscutting and universal goal, there is a need to increase FoRB literacy across sectors, including governments and civil society. The EU FoRB Guidelines serve this purpose effectively and they should be implemented more and more widely.

We should also recall that FoRB issues can only be tackled if we raise collective awareness on FoRB violations on a global scale. Similarly, awareness-raising cannot be successful without FoRB literacy. For too long, religion has been kept at the margins of public life on the wrong assumption that it is a purely private issue. At the same time, religious freedom is often confused with freedom of worship while it has a much broader nature. FoRB is made up of two layers. The first layer refers to the core of FoRB as enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, i.e. the freedom to have, not to have, to change and to manifest a religion or a belief. The second layer refers to the right not to be discriminated on religion or belief grounds. This is a much broader dimension, as it potentially involves all fundamental rights that may come under threat because of religious discrimination. It is a direct consequence of the interrelatedness, interdependence, indivisibility and universality of human rights. Without a correct understanding of all the ramifications of FoRB violations, our response cannot be effective.

FoRB promotion is a collective effort that relies significantly on partnerships involving Governments, parliaments, academia, religious actors, and civil society. Therefore, FoRB should not be advanced only on a purely inter-governmental level but through a multi-stakeholders approach, where all potential players contribute to this common goal, in line with the universal nature of FoRB, which benefits all, without distinctions. We need both a whole-of-society and a whole-of-government approach in this regard.

Based on this multidimensional nature of FoRB, there is also a need to streamline FoRB within our daily policy making activities, especially within development cooperation. FoRB violations constitute obstacles to growth, stability, and development. There are studies

showing that there is a positive correlation between the respect of FoRB and growth. If some people or even entire communities are kept at the margins of society, unable to fully take part in the social and economic life of their own countries on account of their religious or belief affiliation, such exclusion will entail a loss of resources, both human resources as such and ideas. On the political and security level, religious discrimination may fuel resentment that, in turn, may lead to instability and undermine growth.

I would like to conclude by a reference to the broader Mediterranean region, our common region and the cradle of the three monotheistic religions. This area is not only Italy's strategic neighborhood but also one of the world's most religiously diverse areas. Despite this rich legacy, the Mediterranean region is beset by growing tensions that require the utmost commitment of all players – religious, political, and economic ones – to avoid escalation and provide people with the foundations for a more prosperous future. The region's historic religious pluralism has also been under pressure in the last decades. The rise of Daesh, the shrinking of Christian communities, and the spreading of hate speech all point out to the need to increase our efforts to advance inclusive citizenship and equality as a political, social and cultural priority for the future of our common region.

With this in mind, in 2018 the Italian Parliament established a fund to support Christian communities in crisis areas. Through this fund, which has a yearly budget of 4,4 million euros, we support projects run by NGOs in several countries, mostly in the broader Mediterranean region, with a view to improving the economic condition of the beneficiaries, foster social inclusion, and reduce inequalities. In other words, we target the nexus between FoRB and equality to directly address those forms of exclusion that stem from religious or belief discrimination. Such interventions are meant to support interfaith cooperation – as a means to foster mutual knowledge and understanding – and to improve the protection of religious freedom by empowering individuals and enabling them to enjoy their rights in full.

Once again, I am grateful to the co-organizers for this opportunity and deeply appreciative of their personal commitment to the advancement of FoRB globally and I look forward to keeping engaging with them on this common goal.

Some reflections about the 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Paper presented at the conference held on 29 June at the European Parliament to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The FORB Roundtables Brussels-EU and Netherlands as well as HRWF contributed to this event hosted by MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza.

By José Luis Bazan, Legal adviser, COMECE (Commission of Catholic Episcopal Conferences of the EU)

HRWF (29.06.2023) - On 24 June 2013, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Three years later, in May 2016, the President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker adopted the decision to create the function of Special Envoy for the promotion of the freedom of religion or belief outside the EU. Again, three years later, on 6 of September 2019, Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy announced a new EU-sponsored "Global Exchange on Religion in Society" (1). If it were not a coincidence, I would say that every three years, the EU has got us used to seeing an institutional project concerning religious freedom outside the EU. I understand,

unless I am mistaken, that in the coming months we should, perhaps, await something new in this area.

Expectations were high in 2013 with the EU Guidelines, which were hailed by many as a good first step in the right direction, disregarding certain limitations. Just to mention a couple of examples: the lack of explicit recognition of the right of parents that their children are educated according to their moral and religious beliefs that goes beyond *"the right of parents to teach their children in the tenets of their religion or belief"* (2); and of the fundamental right to conscientious objection beyond military service, in areas such as health or education. (3)

The appointment of Jan Figel' as the first EU Special Envoy for Religious Freedom, despite the scarcity of human and financial resources provided for the post - which was also criticized by the European Parliament - (4), was a success thanks to the commitment of the appointee, which created a school, and paved the way for the proliferation of "Special envoys" and "representatives" on freedom of religion in EU members states.

However, the good prospects for the EU's engagement in the promotion and protection of religious freedom have been progressively dimmed. First, there are many doubts about the actual implementation of the EU Guidelines in EU delegations around the world: there is a perception that in some cases they are not even properly known by the staff in those delegations, as the European Parliament's Intergroup on Religious Freedom pointed out in its 2021 report (5). The fact that no information is published or shared on their actual implementation does not help to dispel these doubts. We are aware of training activities that try to increase the knowledge and awareness of EEAS staff in this area, but knowledge does not seem to be enough to reach a sufficient level of commitment.

Secondly, after the end of the Jan Figel's mandate in 2019, the EU didn't show much appetite in appointing his successor, and, except for the brief period in 2021, the Special Envoy position was left vacant for almost three years (again), until December 2022, when the senior Belgian diplomat Frans van Daele was appointed. But, once more, enjoying very limited margin of maneuver and with little resources at disposal.

Regarding the "Global Exchange on Religion in Society", it can be a useful instrument to reach the attempted goal *"to connect civil society practitioners inside and outside Europe working on faith and social inclusion"* (6), if it is properly done and the autonomy of religious communities is respected. However, this would be more on the side of "prevention" than "protection" of those suffering religious freedom violations. Looking at the reports about religious freedom worldwide, the threats and trends that are endangering this fundamental human right, and the biblical proportion of the number of victims, the EU position can't be neither cosmetic nor anecdotal: the response to these massive violations, where Christian are the most persecuted religious community as highlighted by the European Parliament (7), should be firmer and more explicit.

The credibility of the EU's commitment depends on it acting with determination to protect and promote religious freedom. More resources are needed, greater awareness of the importance of religious freedom outside the EU as an essential factor in understanding the society and politics of the countries with which the EU has relations. But also, a firmness that is lacking in many cases: for example, responding to the massacres of more 50,000 Christians in Nigeria, at the hands of radical Islamists (8); or implement the EU's own rules for the renewal of the GSP+ system with Pakistan, currently under negotiation.

Moreover, the external discourse cannot be detached from the reality in Europe of flagrant and, unfortunately, increasingly frequent violations of religious freedom and other fundamental rights of believers: for example, their possibility to educate their

children according to their convictions or not to be forced in their professions to perform acts against their conscience. We cannot be critical without being self-critical: any moral authority derives from incoherence.

We should recognize that some EEAS staff members (as well as others in the European Commission and the EU Parliament) show a laudable openness and commitment to the cause of freedom of religion and offer the opportunity to religious and non-religious actors to engage in conversations and bring their respective concerns to the attention of the institution. However, the commitment should come also from the leaders of all EU institutions. It is in the interest of the EU to understand better the world, which is massively religious, and to avoid the temptation to consider as a universal paradigm that religion is purely a private matter.

I hope that the EU won't wait three more years to take the decision to avoid the progressive postponement of religious freedom to a *de facto* status of a second-class human right, which must always yield to others, or to artificially promote non-consensual new "counter-rights", breaking the natural harmony of the human rights ecosystem, as recognized by the international community in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 New York Pacts.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Footnotes

¹https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/towards-global-exchange-religion-society_en

² Paragraph 40.

³ Paragraph 41.

⁴ European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2019 on EU Guidelines and the mandate of the EU Special Envoy on the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0013_EN.html

⁵ P. 24: <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Intergroup-FoRB-Report-Final-2021.pdf>

⁶ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/towards-global-exchange-religion-society_en

⁷ European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2016 on the Annual Report on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter 2015 (2016/2219(INI)), paragraph 146:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0502_EN.pdf?redirect

⁸ <https://intersociety-ng.org/5068-citizens-massacred-for-being-christians-in-nigeria-in-2022-1041-slaughtered-in-first-100-days-of-2023/>

10th Anniversary EU Freedom of religion or belief Guidelines: a Dutch CSO viewpoint

Event organized under auspices of MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza at the European Parliament on 29 June.

By Hans Noot, Round Table on Freedom of Religion or Belief

HRWF (29.06.2023) - As we celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, I am thrilled to be able to add my voice in the form of a both congratulatory and analytical remark. As all EU member states signed up to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, they showed their commitment to a list of formulated human rights. They signed up to acknowledge dignity to all human beings by protecting their natural rights by law.

As the EU developed over the past few decades it became time to prescribe a united intent to promote freedom of religion or belief on EU level. In 2013 it came down to these EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief. And now, as we celebrate 10 years of its existence, it is time to take stock.

How it was before...

In the days of its creation, I remember participating in the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's planning meetings in Vienna. I was then completely caught off guard to find out that of the myriad of human rights topics that were discussed, not one word was spoken about freedom of religion or belief, freedom of conscience or freedom of speech. Moreover, when I suggested that this was a topic to take seriously, some organizations reacted with the oversimplified argument that there were much more important topics to tackle and that religions were specifically the root cause of many wars and most other troubles in Europe. I was shocked that such a viewpoint could exist amongst policy makers. Since that time the EU Guidelines for Freedom of Religion or Belief have been adopted, and I hear little of this ignorant comment regarding the alleged danger of so-called warmongering religions in Europe.

Why Freedom of religion or belief?

Freedom of religion or belief, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression are not only a matter of acceptance of human dignity but they lie at the core of good governance and democracy. Without freedom of conscience and expression, fair elections are not possible. And without freedom of religion or belief, there is no freedom of conscience, or the expression thereof. Without freedom of conscience, people fall back into the role of robots and puppets in a feudal system. We currently see the consequences of this ignorance in states where this is the case and where, in war time, people become mere gun fodder. Individuals are then at the mercy of the state, and they become a means to an end. The three aforementioned human rights are intertwined and they form the core of a healthy society. Research points out the relationship between freedom of religion or belief and societal indicators in a nation:

- **Equality and Non-Discrimination:** Freedom of religion or belief is closely linked to the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Ensuring that individuals can freely live according to their conscience without fear of persecution or discrimination is essential for upholding human rights and promoting equal opportunities for all.
- **Peaceful Coexistence:** Societies that respect and protect freedom of religion or belief often experience greater levels of peaceful coexistence between religious groups. When religious or belief-based tensions are managed through legal frameworks, safe and fair dialogue, it can help prevent conflicts and foster a more harmonious society.

- **Social Cohesion:** Freedom of religion or belief can contribute to social harmony and inclusiveness by fostering a climate of tolerance and respect for diversity. Allowing individuals to practice their religion or belief freely, helps promote understanding, dialogue, and cooperation among different religious and non-religious groups within a society.
- **Development and Progress:** Studies have suggested that societies with higher levels of religious freedom tend to experience greater economic development, political stability, and social progress. When individuals are free to follow their conscience and participate fully in society, it can lead to greater innovation, creativity, and contributions to the overall well-being of the community.

Societal advantages for freedom of religion or belief require a free market for freedom of conscience, speech and religion with as few restrictions as possible. All voices need to be treated with equal weight and respect, in so far as they also uphold human dignity and human rights.

Positive trends

It is my take that since the adoption of the *EU Freedom of Religion or Belief Guidelines*, we have seen some areas of progress. Here are some positive elements at least:

- There is more talk about the importance of freedom of religion or belief in the EU. A social debate on this topic is crucial. Only a few days ago, on 24 June, Italy's Giorgia Meloni supported Freedom of religion or belief with the following statement: *"Religious freedom is not a second-class right; it is not a freedom that comes after others or can even be set aside for the benefit of new, so-called freedoms or rights"*, and *"Religious liberty forms part of the essential core of human rights"*. We hope she intends to protect all religions and beliefs equally, and not just Christians.
- Increasingly, more cases on the topic are at least going to court in the EU member states. It means that there is more awareness of legal protection. However, their number at the European Court of Human Rights is not diminishing. Therefore, much work still needs to be done on state level in the EU.
- We have had great success with Ján Figel as EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU, and we praise ourselves fortunate to have Frans van Daele as the current Special Envoy. Amongst their duties they see to
 - *enhancing the visibility, effectiveness, coherence and accountability of the EU's freedom of religion or belief policy;*
 - *providing an annual progress report and a comprehensive report on the Special Envoy's mandat;*
 - *and working in close cooperation with the Council Working Group on Human Rights (COHOM);*
- In the EU several governments have allotted some FTE for Special Envoys, such as in the Netherlands with Bea ten Tusscher, who is connected to us through the internet. Also in other countries there are representatives dealing with freedom of religion or belief, such as the UK, Denmark, Slovakia, Germany, Italy, Poland, and others.
- In many countries there is a host of freedom of religion or belief in NGOs. I, myself, am active in Belgium and in the Netherlands. One of the initiatives that we initiated here in Brussels was to create a Round Table on freedom of religion or belief open to all faiths and beliefs or non-beliefs for discussion.

- I see an increase in NGOs collaborating together to tackle big issues of common interest. Together, they stand much stronger, as they exchange information and share the load.

Some thoughts about the future of freedom of religion or belief

As a conclusion, I will share some remarks and suggestions to improve the collaboration between states and civil society organizations:

- Freedom of religion or belief protection is not just a matter for courts or policy makers. Civil society needs to be motivated, even empowered to deal with the topic. Governments can help facilitate that. And there is a need for increased and effective collaboration between governments and non-governmental agencies. Think of conferences, such as the Ministerial, academic forums, and communal building initiatives. In the Netherlands we have a semi-annual platform with the Foreign Ministry and relevant NGOs that work on Freedom of religion or belief issues, and it is highly appreciated. I am also aware of many municipalities that sponsor inter-religious and local communal initiatives. This can be a source of inspiration for more cities.
- Government and political leaders can help by talking openly about freedom of religion or belief, freedom of conscience and freedom of speech in a free society. Giorgia Meloni's speech about freedom of religion or belief this week is a good example.
- Curtail government agencies that make unfounded statements stigmatizing so-called dangerous religious cults and let the judiciary fulfil its role on alleged criminal activities of religious groups or their leaders. There should not be a difference in the treatment or acceptance of minority religions and major religions.
- Develop freedom of religion or belief literacy for MEPs and diplomats, both on EU level as well as for each country specifically.
- As we negotiate on trade, cooperation, and safety between nations and global power blocks, it is increasingly necessary to remain faithful to the values that the EU stands for. Let's not sell these out. The EU was also built on human rights values, not just on economic issues.
- Let's dare to not only look at human rights violations across our own borders, but in our own back yards as well. That would create credibility when pointing our fingers.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

HRWF calls upon the UN, EU and OSCE to ask Turkey to annul a deportation order to 103 Ahmadis

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

[The European Times](#) (29.05.2023) - Today, a Turkish court has released a deportation order concerning 103 members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light from seven countries. Many of them, especially in Iran, will face imprisonment and may be executed if they are sent back to their country of origin.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) in Brussels calls upon

- the United Nations and in particular the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ms Nazila Ghanea
- the European Union and in particular the EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Mr Frans Van Daele, as well as the European Parliament's Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief
- the Special Envoys on Freedom of Religion or Belief appointed in the United Kingdom and in a number of EU Member States
- the OSCE/ ODIHR

to urge the Turkish authorities to cancel on appeal today's decision of deportation. The deadline for the appeal is Friday 2 June.

Media outlets all over Europe are raising the issue as an emergency situation as it can be seen in a few of many more articles in

[Global Voices](#)

[Metro](#)

[The Sofia Globe](#)

[La Fonte Libera](#)

[La Dama Deelche](#)

[The European Times](#)

[Human Rights Without Frontiers](#)

Moreover, [a petition](#) is being circulated.

The advocate and spokesperson of the 103 Ahmadi is **Hadil Elkhoully**. She is the author of the article hereafter published in Global Voices on 27 May and can be joined at the following **phone number for interviews: +44 7443 106804**

Persecuted Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light minority denied asylum in Europe amidst escalating violence

Minority religious members fear death at home for alleged heresy

Hadil Elkhoully



Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. Kapikule border crossing, the gateway between Turkey and Bulgaria on Wednesday, May 24, 2023. Pictures owned by Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light. Used with permission.

HRWF (24.05.2023) - On the May 24, 2023, over 100 members of [the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light](#), a persecuted religious minority, [were denied entry and faced violent treatment](#) while seeking asylum at the Turkish–Bulgarian border. Women, children, and elderly were among those targeted by aggression, gunshots, threats, and the confiscation of their possessions.

Among those individuals was Seyed Ali Seyed Mousavi, a 40-year-old real estate agent from Iran. A few years ago, he attended a private wedding where his life took an unexpected turn. Seyed Mousavi found himself at the mercy of undercover police officers who abruptly grabbed him, forced him down, and subjected him to a severe beating. He was left to bleed for 25 minutes before someone finally sought medical assistance.

Seyed Mousavi’s only “crime” was his affiliation with this religious minority, which led to his persecution by the authorities in Iran. The incident forced him to make a difficult decision to leave his homeland behind, abandoning everything he knows in order to preserve his life.

The Ahmadi Religion, not to be confused with the [Ahmadiyya Muslim Community](#), is a religious community that was founded in 1999. It received [church status](#) in the USA on 6 June 2019. Today, this religion is practiced [in more than 30 countries](#) around the world. [It is headed by](#) Abdullah Hashem Aba Al-Sadiq and follows the teachings of Imam Ahmed al-Hassan as its divine guide.

State sponsored persecution

Since its inception in 1999, the Ahmadi Religion minority has been subjected to persecution in numerous nations. Countries including [Algeria](#), [Morocco](#), [Egypt](#), [Iran](#), [Iraq](#), [Malaysia](#), and [Turkey](#) have systematically oppressed them, imprisoned, threatened, and even tortured their members. This targeted discrimination is based on a belief that they are heretics.

In June 2022, Amnesty International called for the release of [21 members of the Ahmadi Religion in Algeria](#) who were charged with offenses including “participation in an unauthorized group” and “denigrating Islam.” Three individuals received one year prison sentences, while the remaining were sentenced to six months in prison along with fines.

Similarly, in Iran, in December 2022, a group of 15 followers of the same religion, including minors and women, [were detained](#) and transferred to the notorious [Evin Prison](#), where they were coerced to denounce their faith and defame their religion, despite not committing any crimes, nor preaching their faith openly. The charges brought against them were based on their opposition to “[Wilayat Al Faqih](#),” (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist) which grants authority to jurists and scholars who shape and enforce [Sharia law](#) in the country. The Iranian authorities [even aired a propaganda documentary](#) against the religion on national television.

Ahmadi Religion members have also [reported violence and threats](#) by state-sponsored militias in Iraq, leaving them vulnerable and unprotected. These incidents involved armed attacks targeting their homes and vehicles, with assailants openly declaring they are considered apostates deserving death, effectively denying them of any form of protection.

The persecution of the Ahmadi Religion stems from [its core teachings](#) that diverge from certain traditional beliefs within Islam. These teachings include the [acceptance of practices](#) such as consuming alcoholic beverages and recognizing the choice of women regarding [the wearing of the headscarf](#). Additionally, members of the religion question specific prayer rituals, including the notion of mandatory five daily prayers, and hold the belief that [the month of fasting \(Ramadan\) falls in December each year](#). They also challenge the traditional location of [the Kaaba](#), Islam's holiest site, asserting it is in [modern-day Petra, Jordan](#), rather than [Mecca](#).

The persecution of this religious minority has escalated significantly following the release of “[The Goal of the Wise](#),” the official gospel of their faith. The scripture was authored by Abdullah Hashem Aba Al-Sadiq, the religious leader who asserted to fulfill the role of the promised [Mahdi](#) awaited by Muslims to appear towards the end of times.

Braving the unknown towards freedom

Having gradually traveled to Turkey, over 100 members of the Ahmadi Religion received support from fellow members who had already settled there, fostering a sense of unity through their online connections. Despite the challenges they faced, they persevered in their quest to find a persecution-free home amidst their shared experiences of trauma.

Faced with this dire situation, they turned to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bulgaria, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), and the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the hopes of securing a safe haven. Unfortunately, their plea for humanitarian visas was met with disappointment as all avenues proved unfruitful.

In light of their challenging circumstances, the group decided to gather at the official [Kapikule border crossing](#), the gateway between Turkey and Bulgaria on Wednesday, May 24, 2023, to request asylum directly from the Bulgarian Border Police. Their course of action aligns with the provisions set forth in [Article 58\(4\) of the Law on Asylum and Refugees \(LAR\)](#) which affirms that asylum can be sought by presenting a verbal statement to the border police.

[The Border Violence Monitoring Network](#), along with 28 other organizations, issued an [open letter](#) urging the Bulgarian authorities and to the European Border and Coast

Guard Agency (Frontex) to fulfill their obligations under European Union law, and international human rights law. These laws include Article 18 of the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In Bulgaria, several [human rights organizations](#) have coordinated to grant protection to the group and allow them an opportunity to lodge an application for international protection at the Bulgarian border, [an effort that was spearheaded](#) by the [Association on Refugees and Migrants in Bulgaria](#). Many other organizations in Bulgaria have endorsed this statement, such as [Mission Wings](#) and the [Centre for Legal Aid, Voices in Bulgaria](#).

Their desperate bid for safety was encountered with [oppression and violence](#), as they were forcibly blocked by the Turkish authorities, subjected to [beatings with batons](#), and threatened with [gunshots](#). Now detained, their future remains uncertain. Their greatest fear is to be deported back to their homes, [where death might be waiting for them](#), due to their religious beliefs.

The perilous journey undertaken by this minority group raises crucial questions about the integrity of borders and the commitment of EU member states to uphold human rights. Their struggles serve as a reminder of the need for solidarity to protect basic human rights and preserve the dignity of everyone, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Over 100 Ahmadi asylum-seekers beaten at the Turkish border with Bulgaria

Here is some footage of the violence at the border: https://youtu.be/ZkdkB_9HCFY - <https://youtu.be/g49EgywMiko> - https://youtu.be/EJEdgpST_Rc - <https://youtu.be/M70SYmX4Q-k> - <https://youtu.be/hmxDq06SwFQ>

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



Turkish-Bulgarian border (Credit: Sofia Globe)

HRWF (25.05.2023) - Over 100 Ahmadis – women, children and elderly people – from seven countries presented themselves at the Turkish-Bulgarian border on 24 May to lodge a claim for asylum with the Bulgarian Border Police but they were denied access to it by the Turkish authorities.

On the Turkish side, they were stopped and faced extreme violence. **Gunshots were fired, they were threatened and their belongings were thrown away.** They were beaten and dragged away by bus to the police station of Edirne, a city situated 7 km from the Greek and 20 km from the Bulgarian borders. This all happened on TV live as the Ahmadis were broadcasting.

This morning, I talked with their spokesperson, a lady from Iran, who said “It is vital for us not to be sent back to our country because we would risk being executed. Getting asylum in the EU will be our passport to life.”

In February 2023, HRWF had published a news about the [ongoing detention of 13 Ahmadis, eight weeks after their arrest in Iran.](#)

Additionally, an open letter by the [European Border Violence Monitoring Network \(BVMN\)](#) was sent on Tuesday 23 May to the General Directorate of Border Police (Bulgaria), The Executive Director of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and The Fundamental Rights Officer of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

The letter which was endorsed by human rights organizations, including *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, was urging the said authorities to protect the group of Ahmadis and their right to claim asylum at the border in accordance with international law.

Letter by the European Border Violence Monitoring Network

"We, the undersigned, are writing to urge you to fulfil the fundamental rights obligations Bulgaria are bound by under the Law on Asylum and Refugees, Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Directive 2013/32/EU, the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely the right to asylum and to a full and fair individualised assessment with the right to appeal for a group of 103 members of the [Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light](#). We reiterate that all persons should be guaranteed access to EU territory to apply for international protection, regardless of their individual claim.

There is currently a group of 103 members of the faith who have gathered in Turkey after having fled persecution in their home countries - Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Jordan, Thailand, and Palestine. Members of the Ahmadi religion have been labelled as 'heretics' and 'infidels' in many countries due to their beliefs, a trend they report has worsened since the release of their gospel, 'The Goal of the Wise', in December 2022. Members of the faith report that a number of the claims written in the book are considered 'heretical' in that they are considered contrary to other religious beliefs. These views, the group state, have led to their persecution through accusations of 'denigrating Islam'. In fact, in [Algeria](#) and [Iran](#) members have faced arrest and prison sentences for exactly this, being forbidden for exercising their rights to religious freedom, and in [Iraq](#) they have suffered gunned attacks on their homes by armed militias, and scholars have called for them to be killed.

For the above reasons, many members of the group decided to flee their home countries and pursue their right to seek protection and freedom to practise their religion. They do not feel safe to lodge an application for international protection in Turkey due to the consistently documented [violations of religious freedoms](#), including the criminalisation of blasphemy or expressions deemed insulting to religious beliefs. Although Turkey is a secular country, President Erdoğan has [close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood](#) and, In fact, a [2022 report from the European Parliament](#) warns that, in Turkey, religious minorities face "sustained legal and administrative pressure". Furthermore, the criminalisation of blasphemy under Article 216(3) of the Turkish Penal Code shrinks any space for views that are different to the country's mainly practised Sunni Islam. In fact, Turkish singer Sezen Aksu received [massive backlash](#) for lyrics that describe Adam and Eve, considered holy figures in Islam, as 'ignorant', with President Erdoğan promising to "[rip out the tongues](#)" of those who insult religious figures. This event has been pointed out by the Ahmadi group as one reason for their fear that their beliefs would be persecuted and considered 'heretical' in Turkey.

In light of this, the group do not feel safe to lodge their applications for international protection in Turkey as they fear they will be faced with similar persecution to that which they have fled in their own countries. As a result, they have tried to seek legal pathways to Bulgaria and have contacted the UNHCR in Bulgaria, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR), and even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to request a visa on humanitarian grounds. All these efforts have been unsuccessful. As a result, they are planning to present themselves at the official Kapikule border crossing point between Turkey and Bulgaria next week, to request asylum in front of the Bulgarian Border Police. We, the undersigned, urge that this request be respected, in line with the Art, 58(4) of the Law on Asylum and Refugees (LAR) which states asylum can be applied for with a verbal statement submitted in front of the border police. We further urge the Bulgarian authorities to respect Article 279(5) of the Bulgarian Criminal Code which denotes that border crossing is not a criminal offence if you are crossing to seek asylum.

The above information has demonstrated that the group have a well-founded fear of religious persecution, and risk their right to freedom of expression, if they are forced to return to their home countries or to remain in Turkey. Therefore we, the undersigned, call for their applications for international protection to be registered/lodged and treated

with full, individualised assessments in Bulgaria in line with national law, European Union law and international human rights law.”

Signatories:

Border Violence Monitoring Network

Mobile Info Team
Northern Lights Aid
Collective Aid

Mission Wings Foundation
Centre for Legal Aid, Voices in Bulgaria
Библиофем (Bibliofem)
Association on Refugees and Migrants in Bulgaria
Sea-Watch e.V.
Europe Cares
Hope and Humanity Poland
Project ELPIDA
Mobile Info Team
Africa Working Group IRF Roundtable Washington DC
Bitter Winter Magazine
Human Rights Without Frontiers
Samos Volunteers
Be Aware and Share
Network Anthrophia
InterEuropean Humanitarian Aid Association
We Are Here
SolidariTee
Set My People Free (Sweden)
Solidarity With Migrants
Voice For Justice
Legalise Apostasy
United Macedonian Diaspora
Aria Razfar, Professor of Linguistics & Education, University of Illinois Chicago
Abdullah Hashem, The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

Does the EU have hijab bans?

As women around the world mark World Hijab Day, people are calling on the European Union to create safer spaces for conversations about the Muslim headscarf.

DW (31.01.2023) - <https://bit.ly/3YwDHUu> - Across the **European Union**, the headscarves worn by some Muslim women have been hotly contested for years. Some nations claim hijab bans would tackle religious oppression and terrorism, while others argue bans would discriminate against **women's rights** and hamper integration.

Some EU countries have already imposed strict bans on the burqa, a full body covering with mesh around the eyes so a woman can see; and the niqab, a face veil that only leaves the eyes free.

Meanwhile, outright or partial bans on the hijab headscarf in educational institutions, the workplace and public spaces have also been imposed in some EU countries.

According to a [March 2022 report](#) by the Open Society Justice Initiative — a group of lawyers advocating for human rights — such bans came into force after US policymakers declared a global war on terror in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, giving rise to suspicions around Muslims due to their attire.

"The idea that Muslims as a group were the new 'enemy within,' with beliefs and practices reflecting values and norms inferior to those of Europe, acquired legitimacy across the political spectrum," the authors of the report wrote.

Rumki Chowdhury, editor of the blog for the World Hijab Day Organization, shared a similar sentiment.

"I had a tough time because I grew up in America and after 9/11 it was really difficult for me to even think about wearing a hijab because of all the propaganda that was going on around about how Muslims were the ones behind the big terror attacks. So I was scared of being discriminated against for wearing a hijab," said Chowdhury, who is now based in Stockholm, Sweden.

"But in reality, it is a misconception because according to the Quran, if you kill one man, it's like killing mankind and I realized that what people were claiming about Muslims was not true. People were just looking for someone to blame. They were angry, sad and took it out on us and what we wore," she told DW.

"I eventually got over what people thought about me wearing a hijab because to me, it has always been something that brings me closer to my lord, Allah," she added.

Does the EU ban hijabs?

After the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, France became the first EU country to impose a ban on the burqa and niqab in public places in 2010, calling them a sign of oppression.

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy (in some localities), the Netherlands (in public places) and Spain (in some parts of Catalonia) followed suit. Germany on the other hand, [remains divided on burqas and niqabs](#), with some states banning them in schools and public places, and others fearing bans could hinder integration.

In July 2021, the European Court of Justice [ruled](#) that women could be fired from their jobs for refusing to remove their hijab if they work in a job that deals with the public.

"A prohibition on wearing any visible form of expression of political, philosophical or religious beliefs in the workplace may be justified by the employer's need to present a neutral image toward customers or to prevent social disputes," said the ECJ judges. Their ruling came in response to a request from German judges who had upheld the right of two employers to fire two women who insisted on wearing their headscarves to work.

But in October 2022, the ECJ ruled that EU companies may need to justify bans on wearing religious symbols. The court was responding to a case about a Muslim woman in Belgium who was told that she could not wear a hijab to work. The firm said the decision was part of a neutrality rule seeking to foster equality among employees.

Asmaa el Idrissi, a lawyer and anti-discrimination consultant based in Bochum, Germany, told DW that such rules do not help companies grow and are discriminatory.

"I had to deal with the the workplace hijab ban while I was at the Hessian Ministry of Justice in Germany, which told me I would be prevented from doing any practical exercises as a part of my court internship because of my headscarf," she said. "That meant I was not allowed to sit next to the judge and was not allowed to see any witnesses from the front. I was also not allowed to participate in certain prosecutorial tasks, nor step into the role of a prosecutor or publicly represent the state prosecutor's office."

"But the hijab is a sign of identity and a tool of empowerment for me, so I took action against it and my case went up to the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany. The court ultimately found the ban to be constitutional — that doesn't help me, nor will it help companies pursuing diversity," she said.

El Idrissi said companies in Europe need to do more than just provide "lip service" when it comes to diversity policies. "If we want to change structural racism, then we must employ and support people from all backgrounds and not discriminate against them based on what they wear," she said.

According to the [report](#) by the Open Society Justice Initiative, in most EU countries bans and rules on face veils and headscarves have been promoted primarily by nationalist and far-right political parties. The report also noted that five EU states — Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland and Portugal — have never publicly debated bans on head or face coverings.

'It's part of our individuality. It's fashion. This is what I want to wear'

To counteract such attitudes, New Yorker Nazma Khan initiated the idea of marking February 1 as [World Hijab Day \(WHD\)](#) back in 2013, in recognition of the millions of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab and live a life of modesty.

"The whole point of marking this day in Europe and in the USA is to kind of say this is our choice and we should be able to choose what kind of clothing we want to wear. It's part of our individuality. It's fashion. This is what I want to wear," said World Hijab Day blog editor Chowdhury.

"I know there's that fear of what it could represent. You know, according to mainstream media representation after 9/11, Islamophobia has been on the rise constantly, nonstop. So by acknowledging this day, we aim to counteract such rhetoric," she added.

But while the hijab is viewed as a sign of religious freedom and identity for some women, in Iran, for instance, many women view it as a sign of religious oppression.

Last year, when 22-year old Jina Mahsa Amini died in police custody after she was arrested by Iran's so-called morality police for the way she was wearing her hijab,

protests erupted in Iran and across the world, with people condemning Iranian authorities' strict dress code for women.

"Whatever is happening in Iran is very unfortunate and as women who wear the hijab, we support their cause because ultimately their protest is also for women to have the freedom of choice to wear what they want and express their individuality," said Chowdhury.

EU needs to 'show support and solidarity'

Saye Skye, a human rights activist from Iran who shuttles between Toronto and Berlin, told DW that the EU also needs to do more when it comes to creating safe spaces for people to have conversations about wearing the hijab.

"The hijab is a hot topic here in the West but there is a lack of understanding about what it means to women who wear it. In Iran, for the past 43 years, people have lost their lives for not wearing a hijab. In Afghanistan, the Taliban are imposing strict headscarf rules on Afghan women. So in these places it is a form of oppression for women. Meanwhile, there are also women who feel it is a part of their identity and a way to express themselves," said Skye.

"So within the EU, a safe space to hear every part of the hijab debate is needed. It is important for governments to develop spaces where people can share their knowledge and experience of wearing the hijab," said Skye.

"There is trauma on all sides," said Skye, referencing the people fighting for their freedom in Iran and Afghanistan, where the hijab can erase identity, and those who have fought to be able to wear a hijab to express their identity. "So Europe needs to embrace this complexity and show support and solidarity, rather than impose bans without understanding the concept of the hijab."

Chowdhury echoed a similar view.

"It's the 21st century and individuality is basically the new cool. So whether it's wearing the hijab, not wearing the hijab, European countries need to embrace people for who they are and give them the freedom of choice to wear what they want and express themselves freely," she said.