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"Religious Freedom in the World Report 2025" of Aid to the Church in Need has been published

ACN (23.10.2025) - In a world marked by growing instability—from the war in Ukraine to conflict in the Holy Land, and the global rise of authoritarianism—religious freedom is under mounting threat.

Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report 2025* concludes that there have been grave violations of religious freedom in **62 countries**: 24 classified as 'persecution' (the worst category) and 36 as 'discrimination' (the second most serious category), together affecting **more than 5.4 billion people**. These infringements signal a broader assault on the rights enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Today, this fundamental right is not merely under pressure, it is increasingly disappearing.

Below are the main findings from the reporting period (1 January 2023 - 31 December 2024). Three of them, which set out key themes shaping religious freedom today, are explored further in the articles, *The evolution of jihadism*, and *Fleeing from religiously motivated persecution and discrimination, .*

1. **Almost two-thirds of humanity - over 5.4 billion people - live in countries where serious religious freedom violations take place.** The 62 countries classified as under persecution or discrimination are home to nearly 64.7 percent of the global population. During the reporting period, only two of these countries – Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka – showed improvement.

2. **24 countries are ranked in the worst category - persecution.** Grave and systemic violations, including violence, arrest, and repression, affect more than 4.1 billion people in nations such as China, India, Nigeria, and North Korea. In 75 percent of these countries (18 out of these 24), the situation has worsened.

3. **38 countries are categorised as experiencing religious discrimination, potentially affecting more than 1.3 billion people** —17.3 percent of the world's population. In these countries, such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Mexico, Türkiye, and Vietnam, religious groups face systematic restrictions on worship, expression, and legal equality. While not subject to violent repression, discrimination often results in marginalisation and legal inequality.

4. **24 countries are classified as 'under observation' amid a surge in warning signs threatening religious freedom.** These include rising intolerance, the erosion of legal protections, religious extremism, and increasing state interference in religious life. This means that 750 million people could be at risk of religious discrimination. In the Regional Analysis maps these countries are marked with a magnifying glass symbol.

5.**Authoritarianism is the greatest threat to religious freedom**. Authoritarian regimes have systematically enforced legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to suppress religious life. In countries such as China, Eritrea, Iran and Nicaragua, the government represses religion through pervasive surveillance, restrictive legislation, and the repression of dissenting beliefs. Authoritarian rule is among the main drivers of persecution in 19 countries and underpins patterns of discrimination in 33 others.

6. Jihadist violence escalates, adapts, and destabilises on an unprecedented scale. In 15 countries, religious extremism is a main driver of persecution; in 10 others, it contributes to discrimination. From the Sahel to Pakistan, jihadist groups expand through decentralised networks, targeting Christians and Muslims who cannot accept the extremist ideology. Exploiting local grievances and weak governance, terrorist groups like JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) and ISSP (Islamic State – Sahel Province) expand control in the Sahel, while Ansar al-Sunna (ISCAP) in Mozambique and ADF in the Democratic Republic of the Congo seek to establish a "caliphate" to legitimise their authority and ideology.

7. Religious nationalism is on the increase, fuelling **exclusion and repression of minorities**. National identity is increasingly shaped by ethno-religious nationalism, eroding minority rights. In India and Myanmar, it drives persecution; in Palestine, Israel, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, it fuels discrimination. India exemplifies "hybrid persecution", i.e. legal suppression combined with mob violence. Majoritarian narratives are weaponised to consolidate power, while legal and administrative systems often entrench second-class status for minorities.

8. **Religious persecution increasingly fuels forced migration and displacement.** Millions have fled violence, discrimination, and the absence of state protection whose causes are rooted in religious intolerance. In Nigeria, attacks by radicalised Fulani militants have ravaged churches, villages, and clergy, triggering mass displacement. Across the Sahel—Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali—and amid Sudan's civil war, entire faith communities have been uprooted, their places of worship destroyed, and religious heritage erased. Religious persecution is a major and often overlooked driver of today's global displacement crisis.

9. Organised crime systematically targets religious leaders and communities. In weakened or failed States and conflict zones, criminal groups target religious leaders and institutions to assert control. In three countries—Nigeria, Haiti, and Mexico—organised crime is a key driver of persecution or discrimination. In regions with weak governance, particularly in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, churches are looted, pastors kidnapped or killed, and religious organisations pressurised into silence or complicity.

10. **Religious freedom has become a global casualty of war amid a spike in conflict situations around the world.** There has been an exponential growth in religious communities suffering the consequences of war amid a surge in conflicts around the world – civil wars, wars between nations and regional conflicts. Armed conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, and Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in mass displacements, church closures, and targeted attacks on religious communities.

11. **There has been a sharp rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes.** Following the 7th October 2023 Hamas attack in Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents surged across Europe, North America, and Latin America. In France, antisemitic acts increased by 1,000 percent, while anti-Muslim hate crimes rose by 29 percent. Germany recorded 4,369 offences linked to the conflict—up from just 61 in 2022. Synagogues and mosques were attacked, individuals harassed, and hate speech proliferated online. In many cases, government responses proved inadequate, fuelling fear and insecurity among religious communities.

12. **Anti-Christian incidents are on the rise across Western countries**. Europe and North America witnessed a significant rise in attacks against Christian sites and believers. In 2023 alone, France recorded approximately 1,000 anti-Christian incidents, while Greece reported over 600 cases of church vandalism. In Canada, 24 churches were targeted by arson between 2021 and early 2024. Similar spikes were observed in Spain, Italy, the United States, and Croatia, including desecrations of places of worship, physical assaults on clergy, and disruptions of religious services—often driven by ideological hostility, militant activism, or anti-religious extremism.

13. **Conscientious objection is under increased threat.** Across the OSCE region, the right to conscientious objection is facing increasing restrictions. In countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Russia, individuals refusing military service on religious or ethical grounds have been imprisoned. Meanwhile, in Western democracies like Belgium, faith-based institutions are under growing legal pressure to provide services such as abortion and assisted suicide.

14. **AI and digital tools are being weaponised to repress religious groups.** From artificial intelligence to surveillance networks, new technologies are increasingly used to monitor, profile, and penalise religious expression. In countries such as China, North Korea, and Pakistan, both governments and non-state actors deploy digital tools to censor, intimidate, and criminalise believers—transforming religious faith into a perceived security threat.

15. **Doubly vulnerable: Religious minority women and girls - some as young as 10 - suffer systematic abuse.**During the reporting period, grave violations against women and girls from religious minorities continued to be documented. In countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Mozambique, victims—some as young as ten—were subjected to

abduction, forced conversion, and coerced marriage. These abuses, occurring in the hundreds each year, are in the vast majority of cases carried out with impunity.

16. **Despite the worsening religious freedom context, religious communities have shown unswerving resilience as agents of peace as well as emergency and pastoral aid.** Despite persecution, religious communities continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, actively engaging in peacebuilding and delivering essential humanitarian assistance. From Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region to Burkina Faso, interfaith initiatives have shown that religious freedom can serve as a foundation for unity and a safeguard for human dignity. Education plays a critical role in this process—fostering social cohesion, affirming the equal worth of all individuals, and empowering minority groups both culturally and economically.

The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief – Interview of the director (Part 2)

A conversation with Ms Fernanda San Martin Carrasco, the Director of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) about the services she can provide to parliaments and lawmakers

By Willy Fautré

The European Times (02.09.2025) - On 12 June last, Ms Fernanda San Martin Carrasco was on a mission in Brussels and participated in the Roundtable Brussels-EU on Freedom of Religion or Belief attended by over 20 FoRB defenders.

Question: What are the reasons why some members of parliaments and governments are asking for your assistance and what sort of services can you deliver them?

IPPFoRB is a unique global network. It stands as the world's only cross-party, cross-regional platform dedicated to supporting parliamentarians in their efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Parliamentarians face mounting pressures as religious persecution intensifies globally. From hate speech amplified by AI to discriminatory laws and violent extremism, the erosion of FoRB threatens democratic institutions and human dignity. Upholding FoRB is a core duty of parliamentarians, yet doing so can expose them to political and personal

risks. We offer the tools, networks and support to navigate these challenges safely and effectively. We provide the expert assistance that Parliamentarians often require to ensure that draft or existing laws align with international human rights standards. We also provide access to global guidelines and peer-reviewed resources to help assess and improve legislation and to assist in they task of making their governments accountable.

Before IPPFoRB's founding, there was no comprehensive mechanism to support MPs in monitoring, reporting, and advocating for FoRB. The UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Dr. Nazila Ghanea, in her UN Report has acknowledged IPPFoRB's vital role in filling this gap. IPPFoRB MPs value the opportunity to connect with like-minded legislators across borders. IPPFoRB's network fosters solidarity, peer-to-peer learning, and shared advocacy strategies

IPPFoRB offers high level trainings, workshops, webinars, and tailored resources to enhance MPs' understanding of FoRB and its intersection with other rights like gender equality, freedom of expression, and indigenous rights; or with other topics such as migration, hate speech, United Nations Sustainable development goals (UN SDG) and other. The panel connects MPs with civil society organizations, religious leaders, and international bodies such as the UN, enabling coordinated action and broader impact. IPPFoRB helps parliamentarians raise awareness about FoRB violations through campaigns, public statements, and media outreach. It also supports MPs in amplifying marginalized voices and promoting inclusive narratives. We also held Fact Finding mission

In summary, IPPFoRB offers comprehensive support designed to assist Members of Parliament in taking effective action as efficiently and conveniently as possible. Recognising the demanding schedules of parliamentarians, our aim is to facilitate their success in FORB advocacy by streamlining processes and providing accessible resources.

Question: According to your international experience, which states have shown a particular interest in the IPPFORB and for what reasons?

IPPFoRB has built a network of over 400 parliamentarians from 95 countries, which tells us that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a truly global concern.

Interestingly, it is not always the countries with the most severe violations that show the greatest interest in protecting FoRB. At IPPFoRB, we actively engage with countries where conflict and persecution are high, while also recognizing that those not facing severe violations often play a vital role in advancing FoRB. This is, in part, what makes our platform so impactful.

We must also keep in mind that FoRB is intrinsically linked to other human rights and global priorities, such as gender equality, freedom of expression, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It's difficult to fully understand a country's focus on FoRB without considering these broader intersections.

We prioritize global collaboration and our strength lies in convening diverse voices, fostering peer-to-peer learning, and building solidarity across borders, ensuring that every country, regardless of its current FoRB context, can contribute meaningfully to the protection and promotion of this fundamental right.

Question: What are the main obstacles you have faced in EU countries to raise awareness among Members of the European Parliament and members of national parliaments? How have you overcome them?

Many national and EU-level politicians do not prioritize FoRB, often viewing it as peripheral to mainstream political agendas. Politicians rarely seek policy guidance based on human rights standards, and there's a disconnect between their actions and findings from international bodies

A can mention a few of the challenges in raising awareness:

- Religion is frequently politicized and conflated with ethnicity, making it difficult to treat FoRB as a universal human right.
- Politicization and Post-Conflict Narratives Religious symbols and practices are often entangled in historical conflicts, leading to resistance or discomfort in addressing FoRB.
- Political stalemates and polarization further hinder legislative progress.
- Some EU countries maintain laws that restrict religious practices, such as bans on religious clothing, ritual slaughter, or labeling certain groups as "sects." These laws disproportionately affect Muslims, Jews, and other minorities, creating a hostile environment for religious freedom.
- Lack of Literacy and Training of Parliamentarians, they often lack the necessary human rights literacy to identify threats to FoRB or to draft protective legislation. This gap limits their ability to act effectively.

One of the most effective ways to address these challenges has been to frame freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) within broader human rights and development agendas. Rather than treating FoRB as an isolated right, this approach reveals its deep interconnection with wider societal goals.

By promoting inclusion and dismantling harmful stereotypes—such as those that link religion to extremism—FoRB plays a vital role in preventing conflict. This, in turn, empowers communities to foster peace through dialogue and mutual respect.

The importance of FoRB becomes even more evident in the context of displacement. Religious persecution is a major driver of forced migration, and migrants often face additional vulnerabilities due to their beliefs. Upholding FoRB ensures that these individuals are protected and meaningfully included in host societies.

This principle also extends to the workplace. Organizations that embrace religious diversity tend to benefit from higher employee engagement, greater innovation, and a stronger reputation. In this sense, FoRB is not only a moral imperative—it's also good for business.

Moreover, FoRB directly supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including quality education, gender equality, reduced inequalities, and peace. It embodies the "leave no one behind" principle and contributes to the design of inclusive development policies that serve everyone.

Question: How could the IPPFORB contribute to the work of the European Parliament, and in particular the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

IPPFORB Parliamentarians have successfully shaped legislation in complex political environments, advancing FoRB protections that intersect with gender equality, education, and anti-discrimination. These experiences could inform the Intergroup's policy recommendations and resolutions. Additionally, IPPFORB offers tailored, high-level trainings for parliamentarians, often in collaboration with UN Special Rapporteurs and leading experts. These could be extended to MEPs and staffers to deepen understanding of FoRB's legal, social, and geopolitical dimensions.

IPPFORB facilitates regional academies and international workshops, which bring together MPs from diverse backgrounds to share best practices. The Intergroup could benefit from these networks to amplify its reach and influence.

IPPFORB acknowledges its own limitations—such as staffing constraints and uneven engagement with faith communities—and actively seeks partnerships to fill these gaps

The Intergroup could play a role in fostering these connections within the EU, especially with national parliaments and governments.

FoRB is not just a legal right—it is a lens through which we understand and advance inclusive societies, sustainable development, and human dignity. By partnering with IPPFORB, the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB can amplify its impact, deepen its expertise, and extend its reach across borders and sectors.

IPPFORB has a robust network in South-East Europe, with parliamentarians from Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and North Macedonia who are actively seeking to join the European Union making it a priority to work together with the EU parliament.

Ms Fernanda San Martin Carrasco can be contacted at this email address: fsm@ippforb.com

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The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Mike

A conversation with Ms Fernanda San Martin Carrasco, the Director of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) (Part I)

By Willy Fautré

European Times (01.09.2025) - In June last, Ms Fernanda San Martin Carrasco was on a mission in Brussels and participated in the Roundtable Brussels-EU on Freedom of Religion or Belief attended by over 20 FoRB defenders. The European Times talked with her.

IPPFoRB is a global network of parliamentarians from 90 different countries across North and South America, Africa, Asia, Europe and Oceania, including Members of the European Parliament. Over 400 parliamentarians from around the world are members of IPPFoRB network.

IPPFoRB was founded in November 2014, when 20 parliamentarians from around the world signed the Oslo Charter at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo (Norway) as a confirmation to their commitment to Article 18 of the Unversal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter represents the foundation of the network and recognizes the common goals and values of all IPPFoRB Parliamentarians.

IPPFoRB is overseen by a diverse Steering Group of current and former parliamentarians. The network is supported by a full-time Secretariat that plans, organizes and implements the network's activities on issues of concern. The Secretariat is based in Oslo and hosted by Sefanus Alliance International.

Question : Dear Ms Fernanda San Martin Carrasco, what was the starting point of your personal commitment to freedom of religion and belief and how did you concretize it afterwards until you joined the IPPFORB?

My journey started in the field of women's rights and empowerment, where I worked for many years. Early on, I noticed a recurring tension in public discourse: the idea that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) was somehow at odds with women's rights. From my professional background, I knew that human rights are interdependent and indivisible—no right should ever be used to justify the violation of another. But in practice, I saw religious arguments being used to undermine efforts toward gender equality, including my own advocacy.

This contradiction deeply affected me. Rather than discouraging me, it fueled my commitment to work at the intersection of these two rights. I began as an activist focused on sexual and reproductive rights, and over time, my work expanded to encompass broader gender equality issues. I also became involved in democracy and peacebuilding, which led me to found a civic movement in Bolivia dedicated to defending democratic principles and values.

The recognition I received for my activism opened doors into the political arena. In 2009, I was invited to run as an independent candidate by a political party. Then, in 2013, I co-founded a new political party in Bolivia. In 2015, I was elected to Parliament, where I served until 2020. During my term, I had the honor of chairing the Gender Rights Committee, which allowed me to advance legislative work on gender equality and human rights. Interestingly, it wasn't until I was already in Parliament that I came across an organization working specifically on the intersection of FoRB and gender rights. A fellow MP introduced me to the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), and I was invited to attend a side event they hosted in New York during the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

At that event, I heard Dr. Nazila Ghanea present a USCIRF report on the synergies between FoRB and gender equality. The discussion, hosted by IPPFoRB, focused on how parliamentarians can act as bridge-builders to challenge the misuse of religious freedom as a justification for violating women's rights. That moment was transformative for me. I found in IPPFoRB a global community that not only amplified my work but also offered solidarity with other parliamentarians facing similar challenges.

When my term came to an end, I knew I wanted to continue advocating for these issues beyond the confines of political office. I began working as IPPFoRB's coordinator for Latin America, helping to build regional networks and support parliamentarians in their efforts to promote FoRB and gender equality. A few months later, the position of Director opened up, and I felt compelled to take the next step. I applied and was honored to be selected. What drives me is the belief that we can—and must—build inclusive societies where all human rights are respected and upheld. The intersection of FoRB and gender equality is complex, but it's also full of potential for transformative change. I've seen firsthand how empowering parliamentarians with knowledge and support can shift narratives and policies. My goal is to keep building that momentum, both in Latin America and globally.

Question: When you look back at the last 15 years, how do you assess the evolution of the state of health of freedom of religion and belief in the various continents, including in the European Union?

FoRB remains one of the most violated human rights globally. Nearly 4 billion people live in countries where severe violations occur.

Having said that, the work of IPPFoRB, civil society organizations, and supportive governments—such as Norway—has contributed to meaningful progress and increased awareness. Although recent shifts in international political agendas have led some traditional human rights advocates to scale back their engagement, we've seen encouraging signs of resilience. New actors have stepped up to protect and advance FoRB and other fundamental rights, helping to sustain momentum in the face of change.

Advocacy remains ongoing and complex. While its impact can be difficult to measure, we must not allow this essential right to slip from the top of the international agenda or lower our guard. Our collective effort is vital, and by continuing to build momentum, we can ensure that freedom of religion or belief stays central to global priorities.

Worldwide, while international awareness has grown, the mechanisms to protect FoRB have struggled to keep pace with rising threats such as authoritarianism, digital repression, hate speech and identity-based politics. The health of FoRB varies widely across continents, shaped by local contexts, global trends, and the resilience of democratic institutions. Continued vigilance, collaboration, and policy innovation are essential to protect this foundational right.

- Africa has seen a growing recognition of FoRB as a fundamental right, with regional bodies like the African Union and civil society actors pushing for stronger protections. However, violations persist, especially in conflict zones and under regimes that suppress minority beliefs. Many countries in Africa lack robust constitutional or legislative safeguards for FoRB . Religious minorities often face marginalization in education, employment, and political representation

- In Asia the situation is very different in each country. Countries like Myanmar and China have seen severe crackdowns, while others like Indonesia and the Philippines have made strides in civil society engagement. The use of AI and social media to amplify hate speech and suppress dissent is a growing concern. **Blasphemy laws and anti-conversion legislation** are used to target religious minorities, especially in South and Southeast Asia. These laws remain a central advocacy issue for IPPFoRB, as they enable selective enforcement and systemic discrimination. [LN1]

- In the Americas FoRB is constitutionally protected across the continent, but challenges remain. In Latin America, gendered religious persecution is increasingly recognized, with women facing "double persecution" based on faith and gender. **Polarization and hate speech** have increased and Religious rhetoric is often weaponized in political discourse, undermining pluralism. In most of the countries, while FoRB is constitutionally protected, enforcement and interpretation vary widely.

- In the EU, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a well-established legal principle, and this is reflected in many of its institutions. However, implementation remains inconsistent across member states. Initiatives such as the European External Action Service have sought to institutionalize FoRB as a diplomatic priority. Still,

more effort is needed to mainstream FoRB across other institutions and in how the topic is approached. At the same time, some national leaders within the EU have instrumentalized FoRB to advance identity politics. This politicization risks undermining the universal nature of FoRB and alienating minority communities

European jurisprudence has also matured, with courts in Strasbourg and Luxembourg increasingly addressing religious freedom cases. However, cultural diversification and secularization have created tensions, especially around religious symbols, education, and minority rights. The European Court of Human Rights has adjudicated numerous cases involving religious freedom, but enforcement and interpretation vary widely across member states.

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New Leadership Elected to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief at UN Geneva

NGO Committee on FORB (25.05.2025) - In a significant step for the international protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), the NGO Committee on FoRB for UN Geneva has elected a new Bureau during a meeting held today at the United Nations' Geneva headquarters. The event drew a diverse group of civil society leaders and was graced by the attendance of the First Vice President of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO).

Who Are the New Bureau?

The newly elected Bureau, who will serve a three-year term, brings together expertise from a range of global faith and advocacy communities:

- President: Ivan Arjona-Pelado, President of Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad (founded by the Church of Scientology)
- Vice-President: Jonas Fiebrantz, Advocacy Officer for Alliance Defending Freedom International
- Secretary: Stefano Bosco,Director of Public and International Affairs of Latter-Day Saints Charities (founded by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints)

Their election follows the Committee's rigorous bylaws, which ensure broad participation and transparency among NGOs accredited to the United Nations.

What Is the NGO Committee on FoRB?

For those unfamiliar, the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Geneva) is a coalition of non-governmental organizations working together to promote and defend FoRB worldwide, specially through the UN mechanisms headquartered in Geneva, like the Human Rights Council, the Universal Periodic Review, and the broad number of permanent missions to the UN. The Committee reports regularly to CoNGO, a leading international network of NGOs in consultative relationship with the United Nations, which is the umbrella organization for dozens of Substantive NGO Committees.

The Committee's mission is to foster collaboration between NGOs and the United Nations, especially the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and other relevant agencies, to ensure that the right to FoRB—enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—is upheld globally. An important part of its work is also to support the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, providing civil society perspectives, expertise, and advocacy to advance the Rapporteur's efforts. Through regular meetings, working groups, and joint advocacy, the Committee strengthens the voice of civil society in Geneva and beyond.

The current membership and observer list of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for UN Geneva includes a broad spectrum of religious and belief communities: Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, Latter-day Saint, Seventh-day Adventist, Unificationist, Orthodox, Baha'i, Scientologist, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Humanist, and secular traditions, as well as interfaith and multifaith movements. This diversity underscores the Committee's commitment to inclusive cooperation and dialogue across religious, spiritual, and philosophical lines.

What Is CoNGO?

Founded in 1948, CoNGO (Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations) is an independent international membership association. CoNGO acts as a bridge between NGOs and the UN system, enabling civil society to participate in shaping global policy on human rights, development, health, and more. With nearly 40 substantive committees worldwide, CoNGO helps NGOs collaborate, consult, and advocate effectively at the United Nations.

A Vision for the Future

The presence of the First Vice President of CoNGO at today's meeting highlights the importance of the NGO Committee on FoRB's work within the broader UN ecosystem. The newly elected Bureau is expected to lead with energy and vision, focusing on increasing and strengthening cooperation among NGOs, supporting victims of FoRB violations, and ensuring that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief remains a priority at the United Nations.

The Committee's next steps include exploring the convening of working groups, engaging with UN officials, and expanding its network of NGOs committed to FoRB. As global challenges to FoRB persist, the new Committee's Bureau signals renewed momentum for advocacy and partnership at the heart of international diplomacy.

10 years of multilateral religious freedom work

Translating a shared value into shared action

Knox Thames (17.06.2025) - Ten years ago, on June 15, 2015, something remarkable happened. For arguably the first time ever, a group of countries decided to work collectively to advance religious freedom for people of different faiths outside their own borders. Throughout history, confessional states have fought for their own. However, in 2015, a new page was turned focused on religious freedom for all. Now, a decade into this experiment, we should reflect on the remarkable progress and the many challenges remaining.

Canadian Initiative, American Partnership

In 2015, with the ISIS depravations against religious minorities coming to light, we saw a need for like-minded nations to band together in defense of the shared value of religious freedom.

Canada's then Ambassador for Religious Freedom, Andrew Bennett, was a key actor, bringing energy and political support. He welcomed partnerships with myself (then at USCIRF) and others.

After a series of initial discussions, the effort formally launched on June 15 in Brussels, with Andrew chairing the founding meeting of the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Many attended, including myself. The city's international profile hosting the European Union and NATO made it a worthy setting.

The Obama administration's religious freedom ambassador, David Saperstein, joined, as did representatives from key countries like the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, all of whom would play future leadership roles.

The International Contact Group, or ICG, served as an incubator for developing and implementing multilateral diplomacy on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). While diplomats had collaborated around human rights in general, never before had efforts focused solely on freedom of religion or belief. Unfortunately, Andrew did not have much time to lead the effort. In November of that same year, he stepped down after Justin Trudeau's election as Prime Minister. But the nascent endeavor continued. Andrew passed the baton, inviting me to serve as ICG co-chair (since I had joined the State Department) with Canadian diplomat Giuliana Natale.

The ICG became a place to share information between subject matter experts and diplomats, meeting twice a year, once in Geneva and once in New York. As I highlight in my book, we experimented with different forms of collective action. For instance, in 2017, we coordinated statements on social media denouncing the house arrest of the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch and urging his release. While never freed, the government did allow him to attend a mass for the first time in years after the statements. It was a blessing to the Patriarch and a good return on low-cost diplomatic investment.

Larger efforts concerned freeing Asia Bibi in 2018. The Pakistani government refused to let her leave despite being acquitted of blasphemy allegations and released from prison. Through the ICG, we coordinated joint demarches on Islamabad, urging that she be allowed to join her family abroad. With multiple countries all delivering the same message in the same week, the show of force helped convince the military leadership to let her go. We saw how multilateral FoRB advocacy could work in meaningful ways, realizing the benefits of joint action and encouraging more governments to get involved.

When the Trump administration launched a series of ministerial-level meetings in 2018 and 2019, interest grew in elevating multilateral diplomacy to a higher political level. Under the leadership of Sam Brownback, the first Trump administration's religious freedom ambassador, and a former senator and governor, he wanted something that could punch harder with a higher commitment among actual members. (The ICG was and remains a network.) The International Religious Freedom Alliance was launched in February 2020 with high aspirations. As its Declaration of Principles stated, "The Alliance is predicated on the idea more must be done to protect members of religious minority groups and combat discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief."

Challenges in a Fraught World

As someone involved in designing the Alliance while co-chairing the ICG, we imported many of the ICG's proven approaches into the Alliance. Its founding documents highlight a shared commitment to international standards and advocacy cooperation. It stated that the "Alliance intends to advocate for freedom of religion or belief for all" as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and that its members are "willing to publicly and privately object to abuses." Over the past five years, the Alliance has grown from 27

founding members to over 40, while its name changed to the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) and now the Article 18 Alliance. All the while, the ICG continues to meet.

Now, 10 years after the ICG's founding and five years after the Alliance's launch, we must ask where to go from here.

The unprecedented level of attention on FoRB is worthy, as repression and discrimination on account of religion or belief continues. While persecution persists, it is undoubtedly less than it would have been without these efforts. However, we must be honest in evaluating whether these networks and meetings make a difference, not just maintaining them for the sake of their own existence. While a proponent of these efforts, meetings for the sake of meetings are the worst of internationalism. But if focused on the mission of religious freedom for all and committed to action, these networks can still serve crucial roles.

A foremost challenge is lessening political attention. The movement in 2015 rode a wave of interest as the ISIS depravities elevated religious persecution in tragically horrific ways. But memories fade. Now, wars in Europe and the Middle East distract policymakers and reduce resources. Talk of religious freedom seems a luxury while ballistic missiles rain down in the Middle East and Russian tanks advance across frontiers. An increasing focus on national interests by the United States and Europe squeezes space for a values agenda while grant money evaporates.

To shore up support, FoRB advocates can articulate how combating religious persecution compliments a hard security agenda while reflecting national values. Religious persecution is not going to fade away just because it fades on the priority list. We know persecution is intertwined with many of the most pressing challenges, directly or indirectly implicated in conflict, migration, and human rights violations. Enlightened self-interest that addresses persecution can make nations safer and more prosperous while lessening human suffering and reducing push factors of migration.

Connected is softening support among voters in democracies. Recent surveys about religious nationalism demonstrate how it is a persistent and common perspective across every region. It is understandable and natural for people to want their leaders to advance their values and look out for their communities. In my experience, most "regular people" outside of world capitals understand how religious freedom *for all* is the best way to secure a brighter future for their own when explained. It just needs to be explained more. Elected leaders listen to their constituents.

Next Steps

Ten years after the ICG's launch, an expanding ecosystem of actors are focused on international religious freedom advocacy. Diplomats need not act alone; partnership is crucial. In addition to the ICG and Alliance, others include the International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB, the IRF Roundtables, UN NGO FoRB Committees, and various parliamentary groups like the APPGs in the UK, alongside faith-based and confessional organizations. Better coordination among these multiple nodes of activity could realize untapped potential.

Success will require coordinated, but not controlling, action. The ICG and Alliance will likely continue in their separate but adjacent lanes. While perhaps they should merge, the challenge of global persecution is significant enough to justify both, especially if they can delineate complementary (and not duplicative) areas of activity. Both can capitalize on NGO partnerships, which can help maintain, if not expand, high-level government interest. In addition, recruiting new members who fully comply with Article 18 standards will enhance credibility and momentum. We need to move more countries from rhetorical support to actual engagement with offending countries and fragile states where persecution runs rampant. By working in concert rather than in silos, the movement can maximize its reach and impact, even with diminished political and financial support.

For ideas on action, the Declaration of Principles provides a practical framework for how the FoRB ecosystem can respond to violations, outlining three key types of responses: reactive measures, proactive measures, and potential instruments of action. Reactive measures include condemning violence or incitement to violence against individuals or religious sites, whether perpetrated by state or non-state actors. The Declaration also calls for steadfastly responding to persistent violations of the right to manifest one's religion or belief, such as the misuse of blasphemy laws, denial of legal recognition to religious or non-religious communities, and restrictions on the freedom to change one's religion or belief. It's the nuts-and-bolts of FoRB advocacy.

However, getting ahead of the problem is vital, and the Declaration outlines a range of proactive measures aimed at advancing freedom of religion or belief globally. These include promoting respect for diversity, tolerance, and inclusion in line with the Istanbul Process and protecting religious or belief sites from desecration. The ICG and Alliance countries can actively engage with civil society, including religious communities and leaders, while expanding literacy on freedom of religion or belief and related human rights frameworks. Upholding religious freedom alongside other fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, is also emphasized.

Lastly, the Declaration highlights a spectrum of potential FoRB actions. Possible government responses include joint monitoring and reporting, coordinated demarches, public diplomacy efforts, interfaith engagement, victim support, and targeted sanctions. Governments and civil society can advocate together for prisoners of conscience, legal reform, rejecting religious discrimination in access to education, justice, housing, and

employment, and promoting equal citizenship. Investing in civil society, training law enforcement, and supporting human rights defenders are essential steps. When employed strategically across these networks, responses can amplify impact and drive meaningful progress in protecting and advancing religious freedom globally.

Conclusion

A decade into this effort, we must continue to explore how to translate a shared value into shared action. We must expand our arguments for why religious freedom matters inside and outside the human rights agenda. In a time of persistent religious persecution, the ICG and the Alliance are an underappreciated good news story. These networks have helped set captives free and bring change to repressive systems. To protect the gains made, we must bolster these networks to weather government changes and decreased financial support. While religious freedom advocacy has never been easy, the last ten years mustn't be the high-water mark. Too many lives are on the line.

Knox Thames *served in a special envoy position during the Obama and Trump administrations focused on religious minorities in the Middle East and South/Central Asia. His book,* ***Ending Persecution: Charting the Path to Global Religious Freedom****, was released in September 2025 by University of Notre Dame Press.*

HRWF Footnote

Although this historic initiative aiming to promote freedom of religion or belief was launched in Brussels, it is to be noted that Belgium has never asked for membership in the last ten years.

Fragile balance of press freedom and religious liberty - Harmful impact of stigmatizing language

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By Peter Zoehrer, Executive Director, FOREF Europe*

FOREF **(03.05.2025) - On World Press Freedom Day, we celebrate journalism's role in holding power to account and amplifying the voices of the vulnerable. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) enshrines freedom of expression as a pillar of democracy. But this freedom is not without consequence. When media outlets stigmatize religious minorities, they don't just shape narratives—they shape realities.**

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, is not in tension with press freedom—it is bound to it. When one is compromised, both suffer.

Across democratic societies, peaceful faith communities are increasingly targeted not by the state alone, but by a media culture that recycles old prejudices in new packaging. Labels like "sect" or "cult"—lacking legal or academic definition—are used to delegitimize entire belief systems. These terms carry historical weight and modern danger: they incite fear, provoke hostility, and open the door to discrimination, violence, and even legal erasure.

Austria: When a Broadcaster Crosses the Line

One recent example in Austria reveals how public broadcasting can blur the line between journalism and defamation. In a 2-minute-13-second report, *ORF Mittagsjournal*—Austria's national broadcaster—used the word *"Sekte"* (cult) twelve times to describe the **Unification Church**, a legally recognized faith community under Austrian law with no record of misconduct. Its members contribute to society through peacebuilding, education, and interfaith dialogue.

ORF justified its language by citing a Japanese court ruling dissolving a related group over alleged civil violations. But it omitted critical facts: that the Church is protected under Austrian law; that no wrongdoing has been reported locally; and that the Japanese decision has been condemned by leading international human rights advocates. Among them are participants of the IRF Roundtable, Human Rights Without Frontiers, and speakers at the IRF Summit 2025, all of whom see the ruling as a violation of international FoRB standards.

Austria's 1998 Recognition Act guarantees equal protection to recognized religious communities. By ignoring this and repeating stigmatizing language, ORF helped legitimize prejudice. A Church spokesperson formally requested a correction—none was issued. Such reporting doesn't just misinform; it emboldens hate. In neighboring Germany, neo-Nazi extremists recently attacked Hare Krishna devotees—violence fueled by decades of media framing minority faiths as dangerous "sects."

A European Pattern

Austria is not alone. In Germany, state and media actors have long labeled groups like Scientology and Hare Krishna as "anti-democratic" without judicial basis. These designations have led to surveillance, job loss, and social ostracism.

In France, the discredited 1995 Parliamentary Report on Sects listed 172 groups—from Christian Scientists to Antoinists—as threats to public order, despite no criminal evidence. Today, MIVILUDES, the state's anti-cult task force, continues to issue alerts that the media repeat without question, shaping both public sentiment and policy.

These terms have no legal precision—yet they carry devastating weight. Despite multiple rulings by the European Court of Human Rights affirming the rights of minority religions, stigmatizing labels remain embedded in public discourse.

When Media Enables Persecution

The consequences of biased media narratives are global. In Myanmar, anti-Muslim rhetoric helped lay the groundwork for the Rohingya genocide. In Pakistan, media-fueled accusations of heresy against Ahmadi Muslims often end in mob violence. In Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned as "extremists" following years of state-sponsored vilification.

In China, Falun Gong practitioners are depicted in state media as part of an "evil cult," a label used to justify mass incarceration, torture, and organ harvesting—documented by international human rights bodies. In India, nationalist outlets inflame religious tensions, targeting Christians and Muslims. The 2022 U.S. State Department Report warns that media bias plays a growing role in triggering violence.

The Silent Crisis: Christians in Africa

One of the world's most underreported human rights emergencies is the persecution of **Christians in Nigeria**. Thousands have been killed by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and radicalized Fulani militias. Churches have been razed, communities massacred, and survivors silenced. Despite this, global media coverage is sparse, and the religious motive is often downplayed or ignored. This silence perpetuates impunity and signals to persecutors that the world is not watching. In regions where state protection is weak or complicit, the media's failure to report the truth enables suffering to continue unchecked.

Japan: The Weaponization of Unpopularity

In Japan, the consequences of media-led vilification have reached alarming proportions. After the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the **Unification Church** was scapegoated in over 4,000 articles branding it a "cult"—despite no link to the crime. The assassin acted alone, driven by personal grievance unrelated to Church leadership or doctrine.

Nevertheless, under political and media pressure, the government launched legal proceedings that led to a **dissolution order** by the Tokyo District Court on March 25, 2025. The Church has appealed, but the social damage is already evident: children bullied in schools, businesses severing ties, banks refusing service. If the appeal fails, the state will confiscate all assets and force the closure of churches and institutions—effectively erasing a legally registered faith group without a criminal conviction.

This action has drawn global condemnation. Former U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, former U.S. Speaker Newt Gingrich, and USCIRF Co-Chair Katrina Lantos-Swett have all called it a threat to democracy. European FoRB experts warn that Japan is setting a dangerous precedent: that **unpopularity amplified by a hostile press** can now justify the dissolution of a religious group.

A Digital Age of Echo Chambers—and Resistance

In our hyper-connected world, disinformation spreads fast—and stigma spreads faster. In Bangladesh, a false social media post about a Quran desecration during Durga Puja in 2021 triggered deadly riots. The line between rumor and journalism collapses quickly.

Yet resistance is growing. Platforms like *Bitter Winter*, FOREF Europe, CESNUR, and independent scholars continue to challenge false narratives, document abuse, and defend conscience.

Courts are taking note. In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in *Association of Jehovah's Witnesses of Romania v. Romania* that derogatory language by public authorities—when echoed by the media—can violate religious freedom under Article 9 of the ECHR.

Recommendations

To safeguard both freedom of the press and freedom of religion or belief, the following actions are urgently needed:

1. **Eliminate stigmatizing language** such as **"cult"** or **"sect,"** unless supported by objective, legal evidence. Just as society has largely removed racial slurs like the **"N-word"** from responsible discourse, we must also reject religious slurs that dehumanize entire communities. Use accurate, neutral terms such as **"faith community"** or **"new religious movement."**
2. **Provide training for journalists** on FoRB principles, religious literacy, and cultural sensitivity to prevent the spread of harmful stereotypes.
3. **Ensure media accountability** through ombudspersons, independent press councils, and public responses to unbalanced or defamatory content.
4. **Support independent journalism and watchdog organizations** that uphold both press freedom and the rights of religious minorities.
5. **Urge governments and international bodies** to refrain from adopting or promoting anti-cult narratives that violate international human rights norms.

As **UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Nazila Ghanea** warned in 2023, ***"direct violence against marginalized religious communities often goes hand in hand with legally mandated discrimination"***—much of it fueled by biased media.

Conclusion: A Test of Integrity

World Press Freedom Day is more than a tribute—it is a test. Will the press stand with the voiceless, or with the mob? Will it defend Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR—or betray them in pursuit of sensationalism and scapegoats?

In this fragile global moment, integrity matters more than ever. We must demand a journalism rooted in truth, not tribalism; in context, not caricature. Only then can freedom of expression and freedom of belief coexist—not in conflict, but in common cause for justice.

Peter Zoehrer* *is a journalist and the Executive Director of FOREF Europe (Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe), an independent Vienna-based NGO advocating for religious liberty, pluralism, and the protection of conscience across Europe and beyond.*

USCIRF releases 2025 annual report about religious freedom in the world

USCIRF (28.03.2025) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released its 2025 Annual Report. The report documents religious freedom conditions in 2024 and recommends policy to the White House, Congress, and State Department to advance freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) abroad. Congress mandated USCIRF's Annual Report in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998.

"As repressive governments and violent entities attack and drastically erode freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF's independent reporting and bipartisan recommendations have never been more critical to U.S. foreign policy," said USCIRF Chair Stephen Schneck. "*The U.S. government must continue to stand firm against these threats to the universal right of religious freedom."*

"Despite the escalating threats to freedom of religion or belief, there is real opportunity to stave off any retreat of this fundamental freedom and, if pursued with energy and determination, to advance it," said USCIRF Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik. *"Religious freedom is a clear priority of the United States. USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report points the way forward for policy that advances religious freedom in a fast-changing world."*

Highlights from the 2025 Annual Report include:

- Sixteen countries recommended to the Secretary of State for designation as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for particularly severe FoRB violations under IRFA.
- Twelve countries recommended to the Secretary of State for Special Watch List (SWL) designation for severe FoRB violations under IRFA.
- Seven entities recommended for designation as Entities of Particular Concern (EPC).
- Broad policy recommendations to the Legislative and Executive Branches.
- Overview of escalating FoRB challenges in 28 countries, dangers posed by violent entities, and global threats.
- Review of FoRB policy implemented by the U.S. government.

The annual report, including all recommendations, can be accessed at USCIRF.gov. Commissioners are available for interviews with the press. To schedule an interview, contact media@uscirf.gov.