

European Parliament Intergroup on
Freedom of Religion or Belief and
Religious Tolerance

2014 Annual Report

*The State of Freedom
of Religion or Belief
in the World*



European Parliament Intergroup on

FoRB & RT

Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance

June 2015

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Table of contents

Abbreviations	5
About the Intergroup.....	7
Foreword.....	9
Introduction.....	11
Report Content and Methodology	13
Methodology	13
The State of Freedom of Religion or Belief	15
The Americas	16
Summary and conclusions.....	18
The Middle East and North Africa	19
Summary and conclusions.....	28
Sub-Saharan Africa.....	30
Summary and conclusions.....	36
Asia and Oceania.....	37
Non-EU Europe.....	46
Highlight: Violence against places of worship and holy places.....	49
Freedom of religion or belief in EU foreign policy.....	53
The European Parliament.....	56
Institutional recommendations.....	58
Country-specific recommendations.....	60
We have a dream.....	66

Abbreviations

CAR	– Central African Republic
Council	– European Council
CSW	– Christian Solidary Worldwide
EC	– European Commission
EEAS	– European External Action Service
EP	– European Parliament
EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT	– European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance
EPWG on FoRB	– European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief
EU	– European Union
EUSR	– European Union Special Representative for Human Rights
FoRB	– Freedom of Religion or Belief
HR/VP	– High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission
HRW	– Human Rights Watch
HRWF	– Human Rights Without Frontiers
ICCPR	– International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IHEU	– International Humanist and Ethical Union
ISIL/Da'esh	– Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
MENA region	– Middle East and North Africa region
MEP	– Member of the European Parliament
NGO	– Non-Governmental Organisation
OD	– Open Doors
OSCE	– Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
UDHR	– Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	– United Nations
UNGA	– United Nations General Assembly
UNHRC	– United Nations Human Rights Council
UPR	– Universal Periodic Review
US	– United States
USCIRF	– United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

About the Intergroup

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



Foreword

This is the second annual report on the situation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the world done in the European Parliament. The first report was launched in 2014 by the European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (EPWG on FoRB). In December 2014, the political groups upgraded the EPWG on FoRB to the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT) (hereafter: Intergroup).

We are committed to making sure that in this new mandate (2014-2019), FoRB receives the attention it deserves, sadly, we must say, in light of the continuing worldwide violations of this fundamental human right.

The primary purpose of this report is to highlight freedom of religion or belief violations in the world. To this extent, for the first time, we also have written a thematic chapter on violence against places of worship and holy places. With this report we also want to raise awareness amongst European policymakers and therefore we have included recommendations for the European Union (EU) institutions as well as country-specific recommendations for a number of countries.

We would like to specifically mention Human Security Centre here¹, whose research was an extremely valuable contribution to this report, in particular in the preparatory stage. We commend their work.

We firmly believe the EU is in a good position to promote and protect FoRB worldwide, as is indeed the ambition of some of its policy tools. However in order to do so the EU needs to show more political will. We hope that this report will help to build up this political will among decision-makers in the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Council (Council) and will contribute to an improvement in the situation of freedom of religion or belief in the world.

Brussels, June 2015

¹ See also: <http://www.hscentre.org/>

Introduction

The right to freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in many global and regional rights instruments as well as, to varying degrees, in the constitutions or basic laws of most countries. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)² defines FoRB as follows:

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

FoRB offers equal protection to people of all faiths and beliefs. States are bound by international and human rights law to uphold Article 18 of the UDHR and also of the ICCPR if they have signed and ratified it. A fundamental characteristic of both is the principle of non-discrimination. The principle of non-discrimination emphasises the fact that individuals are entitled to full enjoyment of human rights irrespective of their religion or belief. There the state has a primary responsibility to respect, protect and promote rights of all individuals. Although international and human rights law is primarily concerned with the responsibility a state has to its citizens, the state also has a duty to make sure that non-state actors are prosecuted for crimes they commit.

It is clear, however, that this right is increasingly under attack through the actions of states, non-state actors or both. Pew Forum concludes in a report published in February 2015 that no less than three quarters of the world’s population lives in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion, with this proportion trending upwards.³ Open Doors (OD) which publishes annual rankings of countries found that among religious group worldwide Christians are persecuted the most. The organisation also documented evidence of year-on-year increasing discrimination and persecution.⁴ The Freedom of Thought report from the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) found that “non-religious people are being targeted by hate campaigns around the world” and suggests an increase in violence.⁵

More worrying concerns are that some countries continue to deny the universality of FoRB. In fact, in recent years an increasing number of countries seem to identify with one specific religion or belief, in spite of inclusive language enshrined in their legislation. This trend is particularly visible in parts of Asia, Africa and Easter (non-EU) Europe. A second concern is the rise of non-state actors such as Islamic extremist groups with territorial ambitions such as Boko Haram and ISIL/Da’esh. Some of these groups have boldly used the void left by

² <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

⁴ <http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/trends.php?ref=banner1>

⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3gXFZt5sXX1aDJLbIBMbjBxd0E/view?usp=sharing&pli=1>

retreating central government in failed states or are indeed now among the main reasons why some states, or parts of states, "fail".

In this context of general deterioration, it took the European Union quite long to come up with its Guidelines on the promotion and protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (EU Guidelines on FoRB).⁶ However, the Guidelines are a significant milestone and show awareness within the EU that:

- (1) FoRB is an important right that deserves protection besides for example labour rights, women's rights or media freedom;
- (2) FoRB violations are increasing in many regions of the world, including sometimes as part of campaigns to intimidate or drive out certain faith or belief groups;
- (3) The promotion and protection of FoRB is an important foreign policy objective and its correlates with other human rights as the well-functioning of a democracy and the rule of law.

The Guidelines acknowledge that the "free exercise [of FoRB] directly contributes to democracy, development, rule of law, peace and stability." However the ongoing implementation of the Guidelines and the hesitant deployment of other policy tools make for an interesting dynamic, which this report will comment on.

⁶ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf

Report Content and Methodology

This report will first of all present a general overview of the situation of freedom of religion or belief in the world. It will distinguish between actions committed by the state, non-state actors or both. The analysis will also identify the different components of FoRB, such as the freedom to change or leave one's religion or belief, the freedom of worship, the freedom to teach, promote, and publicly express religion or belief and issues surrounding blasphemy, anti-defamation and anti-conversion laws.

The report will highlight one particular topic from within the range of issues associated with FoRB. This year's report will provide an analysis of violence against places of worship and holy places. This is an often overlooked aspect but all the more urgent as totalitarian and extremist forms of religious violence target sites which for many decades were respected and left more or less unharmed in attempts to eradicate every trace of certain communities.⁷

The report will then focus on the place of FoRB in the EU's external policies, analysing the various policy tools that have been developed in recent years and of course assessing their application and impact.

In its concluding chapters this report will first of all present institutional recommendations, i.e. suggestions for more effective promotion and protection of FoRB in the EU's external policies. Secondly, the report will present country-specific recommendations regarding countries of particular concern. The methodology chapter will explain the selection procedure for these countries.

The final chapter of this report will present our dream for FoRB.

Methodology

The information contained in this report mostly comes from secondary sources. The report uses the high-quality analyses of various governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including EU, United States (US) and United Nations (UN) bodies as well as well-known human rights organisations. Human Security Centre condensed and summarized a lot of the available information.

Furthermore, this report uses information that was obtained by the Intergroup directly, in its interactions with EU officials, government representatives, NGOs and civil society in various parts of the world and their representatives in the EU. The Intergroup organized, for instance, workshops with NGO representatives to get suggestions and input for this report. In principle, primary sources are not revealed, but more information can always be obtained from the authors of this report.

⁷ There are, of course, some notable exceptions.

The recommendations, both institutional and country-specific, are the Intergroup's own. They are the result of the Intergroup's own analysis.

The choice of countries of particular concern was based on three criteria:

- (1) The overall gravity of FoRB violations;
- (2) The trend line of FoRB violations, i.e. where these violations are rapidly increasing;
- (3) The EU's leverage with the country concerned.

This report does not present a ranking of worst violators, or a point-based classification. It does, however, explain the reasons for inclusion of countries, based on the criteria mentioned above.

The State of Freedom of Religion or Belief

In this chapter main events and trends with regards to FoRB in the year 2014 are analysed and presented. The chapter combines three "dimensions" of the subject, namely:

- Geographic
- Religious
- Thematic

The chapter is divided into the main geographical regions of the world, with the exception of the EU, which falls outside the remit of the Intergroup. For every world region, trends and developments are analysed for each of the main faith or belief groups present that are, in one way or another, subject to discrimination and persecution. Finally, the analysis is not limited to (active) violations of freedom of religion or belief by the state, but it also includes the, unfortunately, increasing number of cases, where the state does not offer sufficient protection to religious and belief communities against violence by non-state actors. Freedom to manifest one's religion or belief includes many different forms which represent also other human rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and the freedom to teach, promote, and publicly express religion or belief, as well as the right to conscientious objection against military service, to name just a few. In this sense, the report may – indirectly – also shed light on the general human rights situation in the countries concerned.

The chapter on the state of FoRB in the world does not contain any recommendations. These can be found in the dedicated chapters on institutional recommendations and country-specific recommendations for the countries of particular concern selected by the Intergroup.

The Americas

This chapter analyses the situation with regards to FoRB in North, Central and South America. Unlike other parts of the world, this is not a region where religious or belief discrimination and persecution makes global headlines. Nevertheless, in some countries severe problems exist, in particular in Central and South America, as a result of corruption, organised crime and restrictions based on state ideology.

Mexico is a predominantly Christian country, with approximately 82% of the population identifying themselves as Catholics and 10% members of various protestant churches. Between 2 and 4 percent of the population are adherents of 'Santa Muerte', generally considering themselves Catholics, although the Catholic Church condemns this practice. There is some growth in indigenous Mesoamerican religions, as well as Buddhism and Islam, though representing very small numbers.

According to Open Doors, in 2014, in Mexico, *criminal organisations and drug cartels have targeted Christians because they view churches as revenue centres (extortions) and because churches support programs for the rehabilitation of drug addicts and alcoholics*⁸ Aid to the Church in Need in its report stated that that Mexico is the country in 2014 in which the most priests were killed. All murders were linked to powerful drug cartels and trafficking in human beings and human organs. Prosecution of the perpetrators is greatly impeded by the fact that the cartels and traffickers have control over various layers of government.⁹ The Mexican Centro Católico Multimedial reports a 100% spike in violence against priests in the reporting year, compared to 2013.¹⁰ And indeed, Mexico re-appeared on the Open Doors World Watch List 2015¹¹ of persecution of Christians, for the first time in three years.

Still in Mexico, in certain parts of the (mainly southern) countryside, non-conformists, in particular neo-protestants, face discrimination and sometimes outright persecution in communities adhering to the indigenous traditional 'law of uses and customs.' Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) observes that *"Many local leaders in communities functioning under this 'law' mandate community uniformity in terms of religious practice and belief, compelling members of the community to participate in the religious activities of the majority or face punishment."*¹² The organisation states that Mexican authorities are reluctant to get involved and uphold constitutional FoRB guarantees, effectively allowing a culture of impunity to foster.

⁸ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/mexico/>

⁹ Presentation Aid to the Church in Need. Brussels, 16 April 2014.

¹⁰ http://www.ccm.org.mx/jccm/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4910

¹¹ Reporting period 1 November 2013 till 31 October 2014.

¹² <http://www.csw.org.uk/2015/02/01/report/2490/article.htm>

Other countries in **Central America** face similar issues to Mexico, in particular with regards to violence committed by criminal gangs. Gangs regularly target Christians that speak out against them or that want to escape from forced recruitment.

Colombia is a mostly Christian country, with statistics showing about 80% adherence to Catholicism, 13-15% adherence to various protestant churches and movements and small groups of less than 1% each affiliated with Judaism, Buddhism, Baha'i faith, Mormon and Jehova's Witnesses. 3-5% claim no religious affiliation.

Colombia faces a number of issues very similar to those in Mexico. According to CSW *"violations of freedom of religion or belief are committed by illegal armed groups, both leftist guerrillas and far right neo-paramilitary groups [...]. These include: restrictions on worship [...] forced closure of churches and places of worship, and censorship of church leaders. Colombians who resist these restrictions often face severe consequences: forced displacement, forced disappearance, torture and death."*¹³ CSW also comments on a parallel legal system for indigenous reserves, operating under the 'Law of Autonomy', which, according to the organisation *"opened the door to violations of the Colombian Constitution, including violations of freedom of religion or belief."*¹⁴ Open Doors confirms that *"because they are seen as a threat to the preservation of the indigenous culture and traditions, the rural Christian indigenous population of a number of autonomous territories in Colombia experience hostilities."*¹⁵

CSW does not have any numbers for the year 2014, but it registered approximately 150 cases of illegal armed groups forcibly closing down churches in 2013.¹⁶ Open Doors adds that displacement of Christians and violence against Christian women are big problems. It also notes that church sermons are monitored.¹⁷ However, on its World Watch List 2015, Colombia drops from 25th to 35th worst country for Christians. This drop is mostly due to an increase in persecution in other countries, but according to Open Doors the situation in Colombia improved somewhat for Christians in 2014.

Peru has a religious demography similar to most other Latin American countries, with close to 80% Catholicism and about 10% of the population affiliated with various protestant communities. The remaining 10% claim no religious affiliation or are dispersed among for instance Baha'i faith, Mormonism, Buddhism and Islam.

Peru has experienced many FoRB violations in the past, mainly due to the Shining Path Maoist guerrilla and a brutal government response. In recent years the country has begun to deal with this past. On 28th May 2014, in a landmark case, Peru's National Criminal Court

¹³ http://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_profile_colombia.htm

¹⁴ See footnote 12

¹⁵ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/colombia/>

¹⁶ See footnote 12

¹⁷ See footnote 14

admitted state responsibility for a massacre of Christians in Callqui, Ayacucho Region, and sentenced two of the attackers.¹⁸

It is estimated that the between 60-70% of Cuba's population are Roman Catholic, whilst 5% are Protestant with Baptists and Pentecostals being the largest denominations. There are also Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Mormons, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Buddhists and Baha'is.¹⁹

FoRB is restricted by several government regulations aiming to preserve communist rule. According to CSW *"in recent years, violations of freedom of religion or belief have increased in number and severity in Cuba."*²⁰ The organisation notes that religious activities are monitored and regulated by the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, in particular through its Office of Religious Affairs (ORA). Leaders of registered religious groups are often denied the possibility to repair a house or a church building. Leaders and adherents of unregistered groups face harassment and sometimes arbitrary detention.

Constitutional guarantees regarding FoRB are *"limited by the condition that the maintenance of socialism and communism takes precedence over all other rights."*²¹

Christian Today reports that the number of FoRB violations in Cuba increased in 2014, but part of the increase could be due to better reporting. Several beatings of pastors were documented, as well as the demolition of a church in Santiago de Cuba. However, two new Catholic Church building projects were authorized by the authorities as well.²²

Summary and conclusions

Although the right to freedom of religion or belief is largely respected throughout most of the region, important and worrying exceptions remain. The three principal problems with regards to FoRB are (1) targeted violence by drug cartels and other militant groups, (2) autonomy provisions for certain regions and communities with provisions contradicting the right to FoRB as enshrined in virtually all of the regions constitutions, and (3) some government restrictions on FoRB in self-declared communist or socialist countries.

In terms of trends, the situation with regards to FoRB seems to have improved somewhat in most of the problem areas of South America. However, due to continued political tensions and increasing (drug related) violence and lawlessness, in Central America FoRB violations have increased in 2014 compared to 2013.

¹⁸ <http://www.csw.org.uk/2014/05/28/news/2078/article.htm>

¹⁹ US Department of State, Cuba 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 1

²⁰ http://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_profile_cuba.htm

²¹ See footnote 18

²² <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/religious.freedom.worsening.in.cuba.there.is.a.crackdown.happening/46769.htm>

The Middle East and North Africa

This chapter analyses the situation with regards to FoRB in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region). The region, perhaps more than any other region in the world, has captured global headlines in 2014. It did so because of the scale and brutality of the violence plaguing large parts of it. But it also captured headlines because of the increasing sectarian nature of the violence, in particular in Syria and Iraq. This of course culminated in the attempts by ISIL/Da'esh to exterminate entire ethno-religious communities. UN investigators submitted a report to the 28th session of the UN Human Rights Council which stated "*Members of ISIL may have perpetrated genocide against the Yezidi community.*"²³ These horrible events do not stand alone, but come after many years of increasing discrimination and persecution of religious or belief minorities.

The chapter will present an overview of FoRB violations in the region, distinguishing between the major faith or belief communities and the developments surrounding them.

The vast majority of the MENA region's population is Muslim, with about 93% of the region's share, followed by Christians and Jews. The only country with a non-Muslim majority is Israel. Lebanese demographics are unreliable, but estimates suggest parity between Christians and Muslims.²⁴ The respective shares of religious or belief affiliation in the MENA region are set to change slightly, but not hugely in the coming decades. According to Pew Forum fertility patterns are the most important driver of population change, but migration affects Christian communities more than other communities. Some countries experience strong out-migration of Christians whilst other countries, in particular in the Gulf area, see an influx of Christian migrant workers.²⁵

North African countries have a religiously homogenous Muslim population with close to 100% adherence to the Sunni branch of Islam. The Middle East is quite different. Iran, Iraq and Bahrain have Shi'a majorities, but large Sunni minorities. Syria, Lebanon and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) states all have significant Shi'a minorities.²⁶

Few countries in the MENA region have any degree of religious or belief liberty. However, it is around the religious fault lines that violence and state persecution takes place on a massive scale.

Muslims makeup 99% of the population in **Iran**: 90% are Shi'a and 9% Sunni. Between 2-5 million people are thought to practice Sufism.²⁷ There are also significant Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Baha'i communities in Iran.

²³ Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups, paragraph 78, 13 March 2015.

²⁴ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/nea/208400.htm>

²⁵ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/middle-east-north-africa/>

²⁶ Oman is somewhat of an outlier with the majority population following a branch of Islam distinct from Sunnism and Shi'ism.

²⁷ Home Office: Iran Country of Origin Information (COI) report, 2013, p. 10

The constitution of Iran explicitly places the tenets of Jaafari Shi'a (Twelver) Islam at the heart of decision-making, which results in a monopolisation of Shi'a Islam. Whilst the constitution guarantees the rights of protected religious minorities to practice their faith and allots five seats in the Majlis (Iranian Assembly) to representatives of minority religions,²⁸ only three non-Islamic religious groups – Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews – are officially recognised by the state.

Power is wielded by the religious elite, which does not protect or promote religious or belief tolerance. The Vilayet-e Faqih (guardianship of the Islamic Jurists) is enshrined in law, which makes Iran one of the few nations in the world where Islamic law through religious leaders is in absolute control. "Consequently, four religious leaders may block all draft legislation enacted by the Parliament. The Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader thus centralise all powers in Iran."²⁹

The law in particular discriminates against non-Muslims, who are barred from all influential positions in state organs. The penal code discriminates non-Muslims by prescribing harsher sentences for crimes committed by Non-Muslims. Conversion from Islam to any other religion is considered blasphemy and is punishable by death. In 2014 the government executed more than 20 people for blasphemy.³⁰

Christians and Baha'is are the main religious or belief minorities that face systemic persecution. According to Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, more than 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained since 2010.³¹ More than 75 cases of arrest of Christians were noted in 2014.³² As a result of surveillance powers that target official churches, most notably the increased demand by Iranian authorities to provide list of names and identification of worshippers, many Christians have been forced underground and attend unregistered house churches. These unofficial places of worship have been deemed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as "enemies of Islam for establishing and encouraging the expansion of Christianity in Iran."³³ In October 2014, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, reported that at least 49 Protestant Christians are being held by authorities, many of them because of their involvement in house churches.³⁴ One of the most high-profile cases of Christian persecution in Iran remains the imprisonment of Iranian-born American Pastor Saeed Abedini, who was convicted in January 2013 on evidence solely based on his participation in peaceful gatherings with Christians in private homes during the early 2000s. Pastor Abedini was

²⁸ Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (<http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/religious-freedom-in-iran>)

²⁹ Freedom of Thought Report 2014, Freedom Coalition, p. 321

³⁰ IHRDC Chart of Executions by the Islamic Republic of Iran – 2014, Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre (<http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/1000000425-ihrc-chart-of-executions-by-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-2014.html>)

³¹ UN experts voice concern over situation of religious minorities in Iran , UN News Centre, 20 September 2012 (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42938#.VQHx5o54oW>)

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Growth of Christianity in Iran "explosive", Open Doors, 22 March 2012 (<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/newsroom/press-releases/tag-news-post/Growth-of-Christianity-In-Iran-Explosive-According-to-Open-Doors>)

³⁴ Iran: At least 49 Protestant Christians being held by authorities, says United Nations , Christianity Today, 27 October 2014 (<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/iran.at.least.49.protestant.christians.being.held.by.authorities.says.united.nations/42242.htm>)

sentenced to eight years in prison in January 2013 for "threatening the national security of Iran" and despite an international campaign to secure his release, he has remained in captivity for more than two-and-a-half years.³⁵

The Baha'i Faith is considered a "political sect" and Baha'is are deemed apostates by the government and denied civil rights. Members of the Baha'i community are banned from university, denied the right to establish and maintain religious institutions, excluded from the social pension system, arbitrary restrictions are placed on their businesses and they do not hold the right to inherit property.³⁶

In October 2014, 79 Baha'i owned businesses were sealed by Iranian authorities, after the owners had closed the shops to observe a religious holiday. One month later, in November 2014, the Baha'i community was subject to two attacks: in the village of Amzajerd, a Baha'i home was set on fire and in the village of Owj Pelleh, unidentified assailants broke windows, wrote graffiti, and attempted to set a Baha'i home on fire.³⁷ In February 2015, Iranian security forces raided a number of Baha'i homes and arrested at least 16 people in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan and Kerman.³⁸

At least 734 Baha'is have been arrested since 2004 and over 130 are currently detained. Another 289 have been arrested and awaiting sentencing, whilst 150 have already been sentenced but not yet imprisoned (as it is common in Iran).³⁹ Also still in prison are the "Baha'i Seven", the community leaders jailed in 2008.⁴⁰

Other minority groups such as Jews, Zoroastrians, minority Muslim denominations, and atheists are also regularly or even systemically discriminated and persecuted in Iran.

97% of Iraq's population is believed to be Muslim with Shi'as numbering 60-65% of the population and Sunni Muslims 32-37%. There are approximately 500,000 Christians, 5000 Yazidis, 4000 Sabean-Mandaean, 2,000 Baha'is and 200,000 Kakais left in the country.

The current situation in Iraq is extremely complex, since the central government does not have control over the entire country, and has lost its legitimacy with parts of the population, as it is accused of favouring the Shi'a majority in Iraq to the detriment of other religions or beliefs, including the Sunni version of Islam.

The constitution to some extent protects the principle of FoRB. Article 2 stipulates Islam as the official religion of the state and Sharia as the primary source of all legislation. It

³⁵ US Department of State, Commission on International Religious Freedom, 28 January 2013

(<http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/irans-hanging-judge-sentences-iranian-american-pastor-8-years-in-prison>)

³⁶ US Department of State, Iran 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom report, p. 3

³⁷ Baha'i International Community, United Nations Office, 20 February 2015

(<https://www.bic.org/media/Current-situation-Bahais-in-Iran>)

³⁸ Education is a Crime for Baha'is in Iran, The Daily Best, 26 February 2015

(<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/26/education-is-a-crime-for-baha-is-in-iran.html>)

³⁹ Special Rapporteur's March 2014 report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, p. 10

⁴⁰ US Department of State, Iran 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 1

also states that no laws shall contradict the provisions of Islam. But in the same article it is said that Iraq "guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaean Sabaeans." Freedom of religion also features in other articles of the constitution. However, the Baha'i faith is not recognised and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam, is outlawed.

Despite some legal guarantees Iraq has become synonymous with religious motivated persecution. Under Saddam Hussain ethno-religious violence perpetrated by the state was a regular occurrence, in particular towards Kurdish and Shi'a communities. Following the fall of Saddam large parts of the country descended into chaos with violence occurring along sectarian lines. The advance of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) meant outright horror for all those opposed to their specific interpretation of Sunni Islam. According to a UN report from October 2010, ISIL/Da'esh "directly and systematically target[s] Iraq's various diverse ethnic and religious communities, subjecting them to a range of gross human rights abuses." The extremists pursue "a deliberate and systematic policy that aims to suppress, permanently cleanse or expel, or in some instances, destroy those communities within areas of its control" and that these acts amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁴¹ Groups such as the Christians, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaean, Baha'is and Kaka'is, with no real self-defence means, are often those most affected.

In areas under the control of ISIL/Da'esh, Christians are forced to either flee, convert to Islam, pay the jizyah (toleration and/or protection tax), or otherwise face death. In July 2014 the extremists expelled Mosul's 1600 year old Christian community, one of the oldest in the world. In August 2014, ISIL/Da'esh captured Qaraqosh, forcing its 50,000-strong Christian community to flee. Christians are also subject to kidnappings and gruesome murders. Christian holy sites and historic artefacts, including centuries-old churches, museums, graveyards and the tomb of the Prophet Jonah, were attacked and destroyed. Following many years of systemic persecution, two-thirds of Iraq's Christians have fled from their country. Open Doors concludes that Iraq is one of three countries in the world where Christians are facing a situation of "extreme persecution."⁴²

Yazidis, a religious group almost exclusively composed of ethnic Kurds, have faced what a UN official admitted may be genocide. ISIL/Da'esh deems them 'kuffar' (non-believers), who either have to convert or be killed. In August 2014 the extremists unleashed a series of attacks against the Yazidi minority, which claimed the lives of thousands of civilians. Following the ISIL/Da'esh takeover of Sinjar District, thousands of Yazidis fled to the Sinjar Mountains, where they suffered extreme violence, until some relief came in the form of air strikes and a Kurdish counter offensive. Besides the thousands of Yazidis who were killed, thousands of women and children were enslaved by ISIL/Da'esh and given as rewards to fighters, or sold as sex slaves.

⁴¹ Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq July-September 2014, UNAMI/OHCHR (https://web.archive.org/web/20141009043028/http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_OHCHR_POC_Report_FINAL_6July_10September2014.pdf)

⁴² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

As part of the sectarian conflict, Sunni extremists have also targeted Shi'a communities and vice versa. And Shi'a militias, who do much of the fighting against ISIL/Da'esh have been accused of human rights violations against Sunnis.

However there have been some positive examples of communities coming together to give shelter to those fleeing the violence. The most structural relief effort takes place in the Kurdish region, which has welcomed nearly all ethno-religious groups.

The majority of **Saudi Arabia's** population are Sunni Muslims (85-90%) whilst the majority of the rest follow Shi'a Islam.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the worst violators of FoRB in the world. The degree to which the country restricts the right of freedom of religion or belief other than Sunni Islam is unique and extreme even by the standards of other violators. "Not a single church or other non-Muslim house of worship exists in the country."⁴³ Saudi Arabia's constitution declares Islam the religion of the state and the Quran its ultimate source of reference. The country's legal system is based on particular school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence (the Hanbali school), with only some degree of freedom for Shi'a judges in two cities in the country's Eastern Province in matters of family law.

Saudi Arabia's Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) is the primary tool for enforcement of Islamic moral code. The CPVPV monitors, among others, gender segregation in public and private, blasphemy and the practicing and displaying of non-Muslim faiths.⁴⁴

Strict laws are in place to ensure that the state religion is not criticised, abandoned, or otherwise insulted. Under the Sharia, blasphemy and apostasy are considered 'hudud' offences, meaning they carry predefined punishments under Islamic law which include corporate punishments, as in the case of blogger Raif Badawi, and the death penalty. In March 2014, laws are also in place to punish those who evangelise for other religions. Saudi Arabia passed a new law which effectively defines atheism as an act of terrorism.⁴⁵

Systematic discrimination of non-Sunni Muslim citizens is clearly visible in school books, where, for example, Shi'a Islam is called a 'heretical sect'⁴⁶ and Jews and Christians are likened to apes and swine and apostates from Islam to be killed.

Saudi Arabia not only practices discrimination and persecution at home, but it also exports its ideology. According to many observers, the Gulf States in particular Saudi Arabia, are the main sponsors of Islamic radicalisation in the world. Enormous sums of public and

⁴³ USCIRF, Annual Report 2014, p. 79

⁴⁴ Saudi religious police to monitor social media?, Al Arabiya, 22 February 2014

(<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2014/02/22/Saudi-columnist-urges-religious-police-to-monitor-social-media.html>)

⁴⁵ New Law in Saudi Arabia Labels All Atheists as Terrorists, Slate, 1 April 2014
(http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2014/04/01/a_new_terrorism_law_in_saudi_arabia_targets_atheists_and_dissent_of_all.html)

⁴⁶ 'Saudi Arabia: Anti-Shi'a Discrimination in Employment and the Work Place', Centre for Academic Shiah Studies
(<http://www.shiaresearch.com/Doc/Anti-ShiaDiscriminationintheWorkplace-SaudiArabia.pdf>)

private money flow from the Kingdom to Muslim communities abroad, promoting Wahhabism, a fundamental Sunni school of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia. This decades-long campaign is behind the changes in many countries in South Asia and Africa.⁴⁷⁴⁸⁴⁹ Even the European Parliament adopted a resolution that issued harsh criticism of the Kingdom:⁵⁰ *“whereas Saudi Arabia plays a leading role in financing, disseminating and promoting worldwide a particularly extremist interpretation of Islam; whereas the most sectarian vision of Islam has inspired terrorist organisations such as the so-called Islamic State and al-Qaeda.”*

The religious or belief make up of **Syria** in 2013 was 74% Sunni Muslim, 13% Shi’a (including Alawites) and 3% Druze. The remaining 10% are Christians although this number would have fallen in the course of the civil war.

The space for freedom of religion or belief has shrunk dramatically in 2014. It is often difficult to distinguish between violence as part of the civil war and persecution on the grounds of religion or belief. But 2014 was the year in which ISIL/Daesh consolidated its control over Raqqa and expanded into other parts of the country. It was also the year of increasingly desperate manipulation of minority groups by the regime to gain their support. 2014 also saw the further sectarianisation of the conflict with foreign fighters streaming into the country to back the various fighting sides. On the Open Doors World Watch List, Syria increased its overall ‘score’ by four points to 83 out of 100, in other words, a nearly complete lack of freedom of religion or belief in all aspect of individual and communal life, in both public and private spheres.⁵¹ The country’s legislation is a product of the Ba’athist regime and offers some degree of freedom of religion or belief, although certain groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood have always been targeted by state security forces.

ISIL/Daesh is responsible for many atrocities, including punishment for presumed blasphemy or apostasy. There are many examples. In October 2014, ISIL/Daesh fighters crucified a 17-year-old-boy for apostasy in al-Bab.⁵² In December 2014, they beheaded four men for blasphemy in Homs.⁵³ Also in December 2014, the extremists executed a man in Raqqa for calling Islam a ‘false religion’, a charge the man allegedly confessed to.⁵⁴ In August 2014, ISIL/Daesh carried out one of its worst massacres since declaring a Caliphate. 700

⁴⁷ <http://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/de-geldstromen-achter-het-islamitisch-terrorisme-a843694/>

⁴⁸ <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2014/12/20/the-radicalisation-of-south-asian-islam-saudi-money-and-the-spread-of-wahhabism/>

⁴⁹ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET\(2013\)457137_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137_EN.pdf)

⁵⁰ Recital M, Joint Motion for Resolution, 2015/02/12: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=P8-RC-2015-0143&language=EN>

⁵¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

⁵² Isis fighters ‘crucifies’ 17-year-old-boy in Syria, The Independent, 17 October 2014 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-fighters-crucify-17yearold-boy-in-syria-9802216.html>)

⁵³ ISIS beheads four men for blasphemy in Syria’, al Arabiya, 13 December 2014 (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/13/ISIS-beheads-four-men-for-blasphemy-in-syria-.html>)

⁵⁴ Raqqa: ISIS Beheads Muslim Man for Blasphemy as Child Fighters Look on’, IB Times, 10 December 2014 (<http://www.ibtimes.co.in/raqqqa-isis-beheads-muslim-man-blasphemy-child-fighters-look-photos-616769/>)

members of the al-Shaitaat Tribe were beheaded, shot and even crucified.⁵⁵ They 700 belonged to a moderate Sunni tribe who opposed the extremists. ISIL/Daesh is also believed to be holding hundreds of Assyrian Christians hostage.

The Assad regime has been stoking religious and sectarian tensions from the start of the conflict. Assad has tried to position himself, with some success, as the guarantor of the Christians security.⁵⁶ At the same time the Assad regime is actively targeting Sunni Muslims, including civilians. Already in 2013 the advocacy group Genocide Watch warned that the Syrian government is fighting an "all-out war" on Sunni Muslims.⁵⁷

The various rebel groups operating in Syria vary from secular to very religious. Jabhat al Nusra, an Al-Qaida affiliate, has officially prohibited its fighters to target Shi'a, Hindus, Sufis and Christians⁵⁸. However, these fighters do not always adhere to these instructions. In December 2013, Al Nusra kidnapped 13 Christian nuns from their convent in Maaloula. Fortunately however, after long negotiations, they were released unharmed in March 2014.⁵⁹

Approximately 97% of Libya's population is Sunni Muslim, with the remainder consisting of a mix of Christians (many of whom are Egyptian migrants), Sufis, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and a variety of other groups.⁶⁰

Libya is another example of where extremist have become more vocal and extremist violence passes with impunity in a general state of anarchy and complete chaos. The country is considered a failed state by many observers. Coptic Christian immigrants and workers from Egypt have been the main targets of the violence. In December 2012 a Coptic Church was bombed in Misrata province, killing two Egyptians; in February 2014, the bodies of seven Egyptian Coptic Christians were found on a beach near the city of Benghazi. In February 2015 ISIL/Daesh fighters beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christian men, following their abduction earlier this year. Sufis are also at the receiving end of sectarian violence. This violence also specifically targets their holy sites, such as shrines and cemeteries.

⁵⁵ Syria tribal revolt against Islamic State ignored, fuelling resentment', Washington Post, 20 October 2014 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syria-tribal-revolt-against-islamic-state-ignored-fueling-resentment/2014/10/20/25401beb-8de8-49f2-8e64-c1cfbee45232_story.html)

⁵⁶ Syrian Christian Leaders Call On U.S. To End Support For Anti-Assad Rebels', Time, 30 January 2014 (<http://swampland.time.com/2014/01/30/syrian-christian-leaders-call-on-us-to-end-support-for-anti-assad-rebels/>)

⁵⁷ Genocide and mass atrocities alert: Syria', Genocide Watch, 13 April 2013, available on: (http://www.genocidewatch.org/images/Syria_13_04_26_Alert_Update_Revised.pdf)

⁵⁸ Al-Qaeda's New Orders: Avoid Killing Christians and Shia', al Akhbar, 7 October 2013 (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17288>)

⁵⁹ Nuns Released by Syrians After Three-Month Ordeal', New York Times, 10 March 2014 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/10/world/middleeast/nuns-released-by-syrians-after-three-month-ordeal.html>)

⁶⁰ US Department of State, Libya 2012 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 1

Yemen has one of the highest percentages of Muslims in the world with over 99% of the population following the religion.

In the beginning of 2015 Yemen made the global headlines following the Houthi takeover of the capital Sanaa and the airstrikes by a coalition led by Saudi Arabia. However, the security situation was already deteriorating in 2014 with increasing levels of violence throughout the country.

Yemen has a diverse range of Islamic groups and a complex mosaic of clans and tribes. Indigenous Jews and Christians number no more than a few hundred after decades of discrimination and emigration. Yemen's constitution declares Islam the state religion and Sharia the source of all legislation. However, it also mentions religion as a ground for non-discrimination in Article 27.⁶¹ Blasphemy, apostasy and proselytising are prohibited in Yemen. Denouncing Islam or conversion away from it is considered apostasy. Given the strong identity and organisation of many tribes, they often enforce their own punishments for alleged crimes. In August 2014 a Yemeni Christian convert was burned to death by a family member for denouncing the religion of Islam.⁶²

In the first months of 2015 the security situation, including with regards to freedom of religion or belief, deteriorated rapidly. To date, hundreds of people, including many civilians, have been killed in sectarian violence between Houthi rebels and government forces and Sunni tribes. ISIL/Daesh has also made inroads in the country and claimed responsibility for two suicide attacks on Shi'a mosques in Sanaa, killing at least 137 people.⁶³

Around 90% of **Egypt's** population follow Sunni Islam and the remaining 10% are Christian, of which 8% are of Coptic origin. There is a tiny minority of Shi'a Muslims, making up less than 1% of the total population.⁶⁴

Egypt has seen a couple of turbulent years since the start of the Arab Spring. Sectarian violence peaked during the reign of Muslim Brotherhood and in the volatile period after its removal. The political situation of the country stabilised somewhat in 2014 with the election of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The new president promised to usher in a new era of religious freedom, tolerance and inclusive pluralism. A new constitution was adopted in January 2014, which designated Sunni Islam as the official religion, as has always been the case in Egypt, but it also made the right to freedom of religion "absolute."⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Constitution gives further rights to adherents of Christianity and Judaism, for instance in personal and religious affairs.

⁶¹ Yemen Constitution, 16 May 1991 (http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ym00000_.html)

⁶² Woman in Yemen burned to death for her faith, Persecution: International Christian Concern, 29 August 2014 (<http://www.persecution.org/2014/08/29/woman-in-yemen-burned-to-death-for-her-faith/>)

⁶³ Yemen crisis: Islamic State claims Sanaa mosque attacks, BBC, 20 March 2015 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31989844>)

⁶⁴ US Department of State, Egypt 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 2

⁶⁵ Constitution of The Arab Republic of Egypt 2014, 15 January 2014 (<http://www.sis.gov.eg/Newwr/Dustor-en001.pdf>)

However, Egypt is yet to see this promise delivered. Sectarianism still permeates Egyptian society and Christians, Shi'a Muslims and other minorities especially atheists are routinely abused and discriminated against. The changing of religious or belief identity on identity papers remains an issue. Egyptian courts continue to arrest, convict and imprison Egyptian citizens for blasphemy. Even though no legal provision for apostasy exists, other laws, including with regards to "instigating sedition and division", are effectively used.⁶⁶ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) notes that a disproportionately high amount of defendants in such cases are Christians⁶⁷ Blasphemy provisions have also been used in 2014 to sentence a Shi'a activist, Amr Abdallah, the author of a book on atheism, Karam Saber, and a writer and poet, Fatma Naoot, among others. Since 1960, under Law 263, the Baha'i Faith and Jehovah's Witnesses have been illegal in Egypt.⁶⁸

Coptic Christians have been the subject of attacks by Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters in the course of 2014. In February, two Christian pharmacies were attacked. In March, a church was attacked in the Ain Shams suburb of Cairo, killing four. In October, gunmen on motorcycles opened fire on a church in Giza, which had recently been accused of backing the Muslim Brotherhood's ousting. A man, a woman and an eight year old girl were killed and nine others were injured.⁶⁹ In August, pro-Morsi supporters "launched a coordinated series of attacks on Christians and their property throughout the country."⁷⁰ Seven Copts were killed and over 200 Christian places of worship and other religious infrastructure damaged or destroyed. Only an estimated 10% of churches destroyed in this way have been rebuilt.⁷¹ It remains difficult to obtain official permits to rebuild churches and practically impossible to obtain permits for the construction of new churches.

There is also an alarming number of young Christian girls being abducted, forcibly converted to Islam and married to Muslim men. Since 2011, more than 550 Coptic school girls have been abducted according to the Association of Victims of Abduction and Forced Disappearance (AVAFD).⁷² This would tally with the estimation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in April 2014 that around 500 had been abducted. Many Christians are becoming frustrated by police indifference, with a Coptic Bishop commenting "In the last

⁶⁶ Law No. 58 01 The Year 1937 Promulgating the Penal Code
(www1.umn.edu/humanrts/research/Egypt/criminal-code.pdf)

⁶⁷ USCIRF Annual Report 2014, p. 52

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Egypt gunmen open fire on Coptic Christian wedding in Cairo', BBC News, 21 October 2013
(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24605130>)

⁷⁰ USCIRF Annual Report 2014, p. 52

⁷¹ Freedom in the World 2014: Egypt, Freedom House
(<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/egypt#.VP3Py3SzUqM>)

⁷² More Than 550 Coptic Christian Schoolgirls in Egypt Kidnapped Since 2011', Christian Post, 18 June 2014 (<http://www.christianpost.com/news/more-than-550-coptic-christian-schoolgirls-in-egypt-kidnapped-since-2011-121724/>)

three years, police efforts [to rescue Christian kidnapping victims] were negligible. And this actually encouraged amateurs to start their own kidnap ventures."⁷³

As a result of discrimination and violence directed at them, Christians are leaving Egypt in large numbers. According to Christopher H. Smith, Chairman of the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations, of the International Relations Committee, before the Arab Spring, "Egypt's 6-10-million-strong Coptic Catholic community has an immigration rate three or four times that of the Muslims. Coptic Church sources estimate that over 1 million Copts have left Egypt in the past 30 years."⁷⁴

Only 12.5% of Qatar's population are Qatari citizens. Qatar is a Sunni dominated country, with estimates varying from 5-15% of the population referring to themselves as Shi'a. Of the economic migrants, 30% are Hindus, 20% Roman Catholics and 7% Buddhists. Anglicans, Egyptian Copts, Greek and other Eastern Orthodox and Baha'is of Iranian origin constitute less than 5% of the population.⁷⁵

In Qatar, contrary to many other countries in the region, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims both enjoy religious freedom, despite the latter being a small minority. However, the same freedom is not enjoyed by non-Muslims, most of which are migrant workers. Open Doors points to legal restrictions on conversion, provisions for alleged blasphemy, apostasy and proselytising and the fact that Qatar is one of the largest sources of financial support for Islamic terrorism.⁷⁶

Summary and conclusions

In practically all of the countries in the MENA regions, including those not specifically mentioned above, freedom of religion or belief is limited to a greater or lesser extent. Except for Israel, and to some extent Lebanon, all states from Mauritania and Morocco in the West, to the Gulf countries and Iran in the East, define themselves as Islamic and discriminate against other religions or belief communities. In some countries members of traditional minority communities (Shi'a Muslims, Christians and Jews) enjoy some extent of freedom and protection as members of the three Abrahamic faiths. But even in those countries, converts, in particular from Islam to Christianity, face huge problems, ranging from state discrimination – in education, employment, religious or belief identification, matters pertaining to the penal code or social and family law – to social exclusion and violence, often tolerated by the state.

⁷³ Egypt's Christians close ranks as kidnappings spike, Christian Science Monitor, 12 November 2013 (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/1112/Egypt-s-Christians-close-ranks-as-kidnappings-spike>)

⁷⁴ Plight of minorities: Can religious pluralism survive?, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations, of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 109th Congress, Second Session, 30 June 2006, Serial No. 109-202 (http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intrel/hfa28430.000/hfa28430_of.htm)

⁷⁵ US Department of State, Qatar 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 1

⁷⁶ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/qatar/>

In some of the countries where more state protection exists, members from minority faith groups are still targeted by extremist Islamic groups. Other countries in the region can be classified as failed states, or countries facing enormous pressure from extra-state actors trying to disintegrate or take over altogether. It is in these countries, particularly Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and in countries where state persecution effectively constitutes government policy, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, where minorities are worst off.

Few positive examples can be seen in the MENA region. Perhaps **Tunisia**, where a democratically elected government is trying to stabilise the country and develop it in an inclusive manner, with the support of the Islamic opposition, although under pressure from Islamic militants, is one such example.

Sub-Saharan Africa

This chapter analyses the situation with regards to FoRB in the countries South of the Sahara desert. It is a vast and diverse region which includes countries where a lot of improvement has been made in recent years, but also countries where horrific violence was perpetrated in 2014, some of it with an explicit religious motivation, or with a religious dimension to a more complex conflict. According to some organisations East Africa saw the fastest rise in religious persecution and violence of any world region.⁷⁷

Sub-Saharan Africa has two dominant religions, Christianity and Islam. Less than 10% of Africans are unaffiliated, followers of folk religions, or followers of other world religions. Muslims live in the Northern part of the region, primarily in the Sahel area, and along the African East coast going South. Pockets of Muslims believers exist in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa as well. Most of West, Central and Southern Africa, as well a large share of East African population, is Christian.

95% of **Mali's** population are Muslim with the majority of the rest being Christians. The 1992 Constitution seeks to protect a largely secular model of state. Religious discrimination and persecution are explicitly prohibited and secular public education is ensured.⁷⁸ Citizens are not required to declare their religious orientation in official documentation, and religious leaders, including minority Catholic and Protestant leaders, are regularly consulted by the government. The 2012 rebellion of Tuaregs and Islamist groups came with a dramatic spike in religious persecution in the rebel-held areas. Besides religious minorities, the extremists targeted primarily Sufi majority population and their symbols. Many buildings and religious symbols were destroyed, including notably in the city of Timbuktu. The 2013 French intervention largely succeeded in driving the rebels and Islamists out of the population centres. However, sporadic fighting still occurs in the North. The Christians of the North, who had fled the Islamist advance and whose infrastructure was mostly destroyed, have not yet returned, for fear of renewed violence aimed at them.⁷⁹

The population of **Nigeria** is split between Muslims and Christians and a small amount of indigenous religious beliefs. Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is and non-believers make up for less than 5% of the total population.⁸⁰

In Nigeria, religious violence has claimed thousands of lives in 2014. In the past religious violence was often only one dimension of broader conflicts over access to land and

⁷⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/newsroom/tag-news-post/persecution-of-christians-reaches-historic-levels-conditions-suggest-worst-is-yet-to-come/>

⁷⁸ Religion in the Malian Constitution, Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs
(<http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/religion-in-the-malian-constitution>)

⁷⁹ Mali, Open Doors
(<https://www.opendoors.org.nz/persecutedchristians/countryprofiles/2985783/>)

⁸⁰ US Department of State, Nigeria 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 1

resources and happened mostly in Nigeria's middle belt of states where the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South meet. This inter-communal violence, which according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) claimed 2-3000 lives of Muslims and Christians in the past four years, has recently been overshadowed by the atrocities of Boko Haram. This extremist organisation, which has a purely Islamist agenda and pledged loyalty to ISIL/Daesh, has now become the main source of persecution. It calls for the universal implementation of what it considers pure Sharia law and demands the departure of all Christians from northern Nigeria.⁸¹ However, Boko Haram targets both Christians and Muslims, in its quest for total dominance of Nigeria's North.

Open Doors documented 484 cases of Christians killed for their faith in 2014.⁸² Numbers for Muslims killed are difficult to obtain, but they are likely to be at least as high, as Boko Haram attacks mosques, government institutions, schools and entire villages. Hundreds of women and girls are kidnapped by the extremists. In recent months the organisation greatly increased its cross-border attacks into Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

A major problem enabling the 'success' of Boko Haram in the North is the generally weak and corrupt state of Nigerian public institutions. The government has not done much to prevent religious-based violence. Nigeria's Supreme Court has not yet ruled on the constitutionality of applying Sharia punishments in the 12 northern 'Sharia states.' The government has also failed to protect victims of violent religious-based attacks and has not taken legal action against the majority of the perpetrators. Finally, the government did too little to adequately equip and train security forces to counter violent extremist groups in the North.⁸³ Nowadays, the government has gone to the other extreme and security forces are responding to Boko Haram in a heavy-handed manner, which has led to serious human rights violations. During a Boko Haram attack in March on the Giwa military barrack and detention facility in Maiduguri, Borno state, security forces allegedly killed more than 600 detainees, who fled during the attack. They also engage in torture and illegal imprisonment.⁸⁴ In the first months of 2015 the Nigerian military, in a coalition with local groups and military forces from neighbouring countries, was able to recapture some of the territory lost to Boko Haram in 2014.

The **Central African Republic (CAR)** is estimated to be 80% Christian, 15% Muslim and 5% with other, or no religious affiliation.

Following a coup in 2013, CAR descended into extreme violence, including targeted killings based on religious affiliation. In 2013 majority Muslim Séléka rebels took control of CAR's capital Bangui and targeted Christians and their churches and properties. This anti-Christian

⁸¹ Boko Haram declares allegiance to Islamic State, The Guardian, 8 March 2015

(<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/07/boko-haram-suicide-bombers-50-dead-maiduguri>)

⁸²<http://www.christiantimes.com/article/5000.christians.killed.over.1000.churches.attacked.in.2014.as.persecution.escalates/50242.htm>

⁸³ Religious Freedom in Nigeria, Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs

(<http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/religious-freedom-in-nigeria>)

⁸⁴ Nigeria World Report 2015, Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/nigeria>)

violence, which continues, albeit at a lower intensity, until today, led Open Doors to place CAR on its World Watch List 2015, on 17th place.

In the second half of 2013, Christian militias formed a counterforce, the anti-balaka. In December 2013 these militias began a targeted killing spree that lasted well into 2014. The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic concluded in December 2014 that "ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population by the anti-balaka constitutes a crime against humanity."⁸⁵ USCIRF cites reports that by March 2015, 417 of CAR's 436 mosques have been destroyed and that 99 percent of Bangui's Muslims and 80 percent of the entire country's Muslim population has fled.⁸⁶ Currently a large UN peacekeeping operation is under way, which has brought the situation, especially in Bangui, somewhat under control.

97% of **Sudan's** population are Muslim. The majority adheres to Sunni Islam, but Sufism is represented in significant numbers as well. There are also small communities of Shi'a Muslims, Salafists and the Republican Brothers. Christians, which primarily reside in the Northern areas of the country and the Nuba Mountains, make up for 3% of the total population.

Following the breakoff of South Sudan, the government seems to have embarked upon an intensified campaign of 'Islamisation' and 'Arabisation.' On the Open Doors World Watch List 2015 the country jumped from 11th to 6th position, with particularly high scores for anti-Christian violence and official attempts to control all aspects of life for citizens.⁸⁷ Despite some lip-service to religious freedom in the country's constitution, Sharia is identified as principle source of legislation. This is reflected in the criminal and civil codes which prescribe for instance corporal punishments for a range of presumed offenses. Furthermore, a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man, but a Muslim man has the right to have a Christian or Jewish wife. All religious groups are required to register with the state to obtain full legal rights.⁸⁸

Sudan enforces one of the most extreme interpretations of the Sharia criminal code. Apostasy is a crime punishable by death. Before being executed, the suspected converts are ill-treated and frequently tortured.⁸⁹ Since 2011, the number of people charged with apostasy has risen exponentially and many of those are from Darfur's Hausa tribe.⁹⁰ The most prominent case in recent years has been that of Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, a Christian woman condemned to death for allegedly leaving Islam. She was released in 2014 after an international campaign and left Sudan for Italy.⁹¹ Blasphemy is criminalised and carries a six

⁸⁵ <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1471229.pdf>

⁸⁶ <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Central%20African%20Republic%202015.pdf>

⁸⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/sudan/>

⁸⁸ US Department of State, Sudan 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 3

⁸⁹ USCIRF, Annual Report 2014, p. 83

⁹⁰ Sudan – freedom of religion or belief, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, December 2013 (<http://www.cswusa.org/filerequest/3106.pdf>)

⁹¹ Meriam Ibrahim, Sudanese Woman Spared Death, Arrives in the U.S., Newsweek, 1 August 2014 (<http://www.newsweek.com/meriam-ibrahim-sudanese-woman-spared-death-arrives-us-262643>)

month prison sentence, flogging and/or fine. Whilst proselytising is not specifically banned, the government outlaws conversion from Islam to another religion – an offence which is punishable by death. There have been reports of non-Muslims being pressured into converting to Islam, for instance because of discrimination in the employment sector.⁹²

The Sudanese government is currently actively trying to push Christians and Christianity out of the country. In February 2014, the Sudanese Church of Christ was bulldozed and to date the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church remains confiscated.⁹³

There are no reliable statistics with regard to religious affiliation in **Eritrea** and numbers range from 62-50% Christian to 50-36% Muslim. There is also a small Baha'i community which represents less than 1%.⁹⁴

The military dictatorship strives to hold an iron grip on all religious affairs of the country's Muslim and Christian communities. Religious persecution is part of generalised oppression which sends hundreds of refugees abroad, every day.⁹⁵ Only four religious communities are officially recognised by the state: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.⁹⁶ Members of non-recognised religious groups are arrested to an excessive degree and the state closely monitors the four registered communities. Recently, the government imprisoned Muslims who were opposed to the government appointed head of the Muslim community. In 2007, the government forcefully deposed the Eritrean Orthodox Church patriarch, Abune Antonios, after he disobeyed government interference in the affairs of the church. To this day, he remains under house arrest.⁹⁷

Members of non-recognised religious groups have been the target of mass arrests, detention in oppressive conditions and torture. The government mainly targets Christians – between 2000 and 3000 are currently detained in Eritrea – and, amongst them, mostly Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses, the latter of whom are denied citizenship since 1994.⁹⁸ According to Human Rights Watch, there are about 73 jailed Jehovah's Witnesses today, including a group detained during Bible study in April 2014.⁹⁹ To define oneself as an atheist is legally unrecognisable and subject to extreme social persecution.¹⁰⁰

⁹² US Department of State, Sudan 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 3

⁹³ Sudanese Authorities Demolish Church Building in Anti-Christian Campaign, Morning Star News, 20 February 2014 (<http://morningstarnews.org/2014/02/sudanese-authorities-demolish-church-building/>)

⁹⁴ US Department of State, Eritrea 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 1

⁹⁵ Eritrea blighted by 'ruthless repression' and human rights violations, says UN, *The Guardian*, 19 March 2015 (<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/19/eritrea-ruthless-repression-human-rights-violations-un-commission>)

⁹⁶ Freedom of Thought Report 2014, Freedom Coalition, p. 33

⁹⁷ USCIRF, Annual Report 2014, p. 56

⁹⁸ USCIRF, Annual Report 2014, p. 56

⁹⁹ Eritrea World Report 2015, Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/eritrea>)

¹⁰⁰ *Freedom of Thought Report 2014*, Freedom Coalition, p. 32

In **Djibouti**, a country with roughly 94% Muslim and 6% Christian population, persecution of Christians increased enormously during 2014 as a result of Islamic extremism and dictatorial paranoia. The country jumped 14 points and 22 places on Open Doors' World Watch List 2015.¹⁰¹ Parallel to other East African countries and other nearby countries like Yemen and Somalia, Islamic radicalism is growing. Located at a very strategic location of the Gulf of Aden, Djibouti has been a transit for many radical jihadists who leave their footprint behind.¹⁰²

Two-thirds of **Ethiopia's** population are Christian and one-third Muslim. There are also small communities of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and followers of indigenous religions.

Ethiopia is a country with a tradition of religious or belief tolerance and interreligious cooperation. The country almost completely copied article 18 UDHR into its own constitution, leaving out only the right to change a religion or belief.¹⁰³ Apart from the Christian majority, the Muslim and Jewish minorities enjoy legal protection.

However, since 2011 the government is increasing the pressure on the country's Muslim community in response to the threat of Islamic extremism, both from within its own Muslim community and from Al-Shabab across the border in Somalia. For instance, the state ordered the holding of mandatory religious tolerance trainings for all imams, Islamic school teachers and administrators in the Addis Ababa and Amhara, Harar, and Omiriyah regions. The training imposed the al-Ahbash Islamic ideology, a predominantly Sufi movement which advocates Islamic pluralism and opposes any linkage between religion and politics. Imams who refused to preach it were dismissed or, in some instances, jailed. This policy was met with peaceful protests by the Muslim community, which insisted on the constitutional right of religious freedom. However, in the second half of 2012, the situation escalated and thousands of protesters were arrested and some of them physically abused by authorities.¹⁰⁴ In the reporting year 2014 the intensity of the anti-Muslim crackdown seems to have lessened somewhat, but overall levels remain high.

Recently, there has been a surge of small-scale religious violence and reprisal attacks, mainly targeting Christians in Muslim-majority regions. According to Open Doors, Christians face harassment and exclusion in these parts of the country and at least 60 violent incidents against Christians were recorded in 2014.¹⁰⁵ Members of the Christian community also encounter problems when exhibiting Christian symbols and accessing religious media. In Muslim-majority areas, opposition to conversion is severe and common and converts often

¹⁰¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/djibouti/>

¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ Ethiopian Constitution, University of Pennsylvania –African Studies Center, 21 August 1995 (http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/Ethiopian_Constitution.html)

¹⁰⁴ *USCIRF Annual Report 2014*, p. 157

¹⁰⁵ Ethiopia World Watch List 2014, Open Doors (<http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/ethiopia.php>)

face violence at the hands of family members. A Christian women was reportedly killed by her Muslim husband after she endured two years of physical abuse following her conversion to Christianity.¹⁰⁶

Most people in the **Somalia** are Muslim with the majority being Sunni, predominantly leaning towards the Salafist interpretation of the religion. Small communities of Christians and other religions are believed to reside in Somalia, but accurate statistics are impossible to obtain.

Somalia is the archetypical failed state with a decades-long history of anarchy and extremism in all or parts of the country. The country is placed second on Open Doors World Watch List 2015 with extreme levels of persecution. An internationally-backed government took power in 2012 and returned a degree of stability and constitutional order to the country, but extreme violations of FoRB remain, especially in the areas outside of the control of the government. At the same time the government, as it gains more control, seems to join in the persecution of Christians.¹⁰⁷

In 2012, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) adopted the first Provisional Federal Constitution (PFC) in decades. Although it provides for some freedom of religion by stating that all citizens, regardless of religion, are afforded equal rights and duties before the law and that each person is free to practice his or her religion, the constitution enshrines Islam as the state religion. Furthermore, it establishes the Sharia as the principle source of legislation and outlaws the propagation of any other religion but Islam. Article 17 demonstrates best the contradicting principles of the Somalian Constitution: "(1) Every person is free to practice his or her religion. (2) No religion other than Islam can be propagated in the Federal Republic of Somalia."¹⁰⁸ Overall, the Constitution of Somalia heavily discriminates against non-Muslims. They are barred from all levels of higher government, as both the president as well as all members of the House of Representatives must be Muslim.¹⁰⁹ Interfaith marriage is banned, atheism is outlawed and acts of blasphemy and apostasy are subject to severe punishment under the 1963 penal code in accordance with the Sharia.¹¹⁰

Al-Shabaab, the extremely violent Somali Islamist group, follows a policy of religious cleansing and has declared it "wants Somalia free of any Christians."¹¹¹ In areas where al-Shabaab rules, Christians are forced to practice in complete secrecy. This means they cannot own Bibles or religious symbols. Any indication of them being non-Muslim can lead to execution on the spot. According to Freedom House, "anyone accused of apostasy risks

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/somalia/>

¹⁰⁸ The Federal Republic of Somalia Provisional Constitution, UN Mission, 1 August 2012

(<http://unpos.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=RkJTOSpoMME=>)

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *The Freedom of Thought Report 2013*, p. 53 (file:///C:/Users/jl788_000/Downloads/FOT2014%20Full%2020141210.pdf)

¹¹¹ *Somalia World Watch List*, Open Doors (<http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/somalia.php>)

execution by the Shabaab, which has also denied FoRB to moderate Muslims and has caused deep offense among many Somalis by destroying the graves of Sufi saints.”¹¹²

Several beheadings of Christians were reported in 2014, as well as widely publicised cross-border attacks targeting Christians in Kenya.

In **Kenya**, whose population identifies roughly 82% as Christian, 11% as Muslim and small numbers as Baha'i, Hindu and indigenous religions, home-grown radical Islam and militants crossing the border from Somalia are severely persecuting Christians. The government's approach to pushing for an unbalanced secularist agenda also has an impact on the Kenyan church, as some of the agenda being pushed by the government contradicts with the values and principles of Christianity. Violence has increased in different parts of the country particularly where Islamic radicalism is high.¹¹³

Summary and conclusions

As mentioned before, Sub-Saharan Africa is a vast and diverse region, which in 2014 has seen good and bad trends. On the whole, however, the region and in particular East Africa, has seen religious violence increase sharply. This trend is a continuation of a multi-year trend observed by many organisations. The main frictions occur where Christian and Muslims communities meet. In many, but not all, cases, religion is only one dimension of conflicts that also include ethnic rivalry, land disputes and general development issues. However, in the countries where religious violence increased most, like Nigeria, Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti, the increase was due to explicitly religiously motivated Islamic terrorism by organisations like Boko Haram and Al Shabaab.

¹¹² Somalia 2014, Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/somalia#.VQndh47F8Yc>)

¹¹³ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/kenya/>

Asia and Oceania

Asia and Oceania are vast continents and it is therefore impossible to describe general trends that would hold for all countries in this region. Instead, a number of countries have been selected that stand out, as the situation in respect of freedom of religion or belief is particularly cumbersome.

Afghanistan's population is estimated to be 99 percent Muslim, with four fifths Sunni and one fifth Shi'a. Less than 1 percent identifies themselves as Hindu, Sikh, Christian or Baha'i. The country still struggles to find stability in the face of Islamic extremism. Violence by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda have targeted, inter alia, religious leaders, 800 of whom have been killed as they were considered 'un-Islamic.'¹¹⁴ At the moment, there are indications that also ISIL/Da'esh is increasingly active in the country, thus further undermining Afghanistan's stability.

Since the government is not fully in control of the country, it cannot be held responsible for all violations of freedom of religion or belief. Nevertheless, it is responsible for Afghanistan's Constitution which not only declares Islam to be the religion or the state, but also contains a general provision (article 3) which states that "no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam" and that "the provisions of adherence to the fundamentals of the sacred religion of Islam and the regime of the Islamic Republic cannot be amended."¹¹⁵

These provisions are no dead letters: all citizens are automatically considered Muslim by the State. As such, no separate law applies to non-Muslims and they can be charged under Islamic (Hanafi) jurisprudence. Apostasy is forbidden and is officially punished with death by stoning. The death penalty equally applies with regard to blasphemy. However, in practice, people are hardly ever convicted.

The Shi'a Muslims constitute a minority in Afghanistan. Hazaras, a Persian speaking minority who are overwhelmingly Shi'a Muslims, have been the subject of several attacks, reviled as apostates by Sunni Muslim extremists.

Christians face significant persecution. The only church in the country is located on the grounds of the Italian embassy. There are still four synagogues, but there are no Jews left to worship in them.

Although **Bangladesh** is officially a secular state, it considers Islam to be the state religion. Approximately 90 percent of its population are Muslim, 9 percent Hindu and the most of remainder Christians and Buddhists. There are no laws against conversion. However, Muslims

¹¹⁴ The 'dissenting' clerics killed in Afghanistan, *BBC*, 19 November 2013 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22885170>)

¹¹⁵ The Constitution of Afghanistan, Afghan Embassy, 26 January 2004 (<http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/TheConstitution.pdf>)

seeking to convert may be facing notaries who refuse to register their document.¹¹⁶ Under the penal code, any person who has a 'deliberate' or 'malicious' intention of 'hurting religious sentiments' is liable to fines or up to two-years' imprisonment.

Targeting of religious minorities is hardly uncommon, with Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and Ahmadiyyas coming under attack in recent years. While such violence was often perpetrated by the opposition-affiliated Islamists, the government and the police were not always seen to be prompt in protecting the affected minorities from abuses directed against them by nongovernmental actors, and government-affiliated actors have also been implicated in the instigation of such violence. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, the most important human rights organisation in Bangladesh, the violence against Hindus alone resulted in 2014 in 761 homes and 193 businesses destroyed; 247 temples, monasteries and statues vandalised; 255 persons injured, two raped and one killed.¹¹⁷

Since October 2013, **Brunei Darussalam** is governed on the basis of a rigorous version of the Sharia which applies to Muslims and non-Muslims alike and whose reach has been gradually extended. In the reporting year 2014 the Shari'ah was extended to the penal code.¹¹⁸ Whereas 67% of Brunei's population consists of Muslims, there are important minorities: Buddhists (13%), Christians (10%), Hindus, Baha'is, Taoists, Sikhs, Nasranis and atheists (together also 10%).

As a consequence of the new stricter rules, Muslims can no longer change their religion without approval of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and adultery, apostasy and insulting the religion of Islam and Mohammed are punishable by death.¹¹⁹ Freedom of religion or belief is severely restricted for other religions or beliefs than the officially proclaimed Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam.

Burma is a predominantly Buddhist country (90% of the population), with Christian and Muslim minorities (around 4%) and other religions and beliefs being represented in smaller numbers, such as Hindus and Jews.

The State does not protect freedom of religion or belief. The military often plays a key role in violent attacks against religious and belief communities. Furthermore, anti-discrimination laws do not apply to ethnic groups, so discrimination against groups such as the Rohingya Muslims is widespread.¹²⁰ Since 1982, the Rohingya Muslims have been deprived of their citizenship, which means that they are not entitled to secondary education, nor to any state benefits. The government restricts their right to marriage as well as the number of children they may have. They are furthermore restricted in their freedom of movement

¹¹⁶ ACN, Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014: Country Report–Bangladesh, p. 2

¹¹⁷ Violence against the Hindu Community Statistics 2014, January-December, 2014 (ASK Documentation – Ain o Salish Kendra)

¹¹⁸ Brunei World Watch List 2014, Open Doors (<http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/brunei.php>)

¹¹⁹ US Department of State, Brunei 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom, p. 3

¹²⁰ US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2013: Burma, p. 3

within the country. Recently, international pressure prompted the Burmese government to grant citizenship again, but only if the Rohingyas renounce their name and enlist as another ethnicity.¹²¹

Christians in Burma have also been persecuted, especially those belonging to the Kachin people.¹²² Churches were destroyed, as well as the villages in which the Kachin lived, and over 120,000 of them were displaced. Cases of forced labour were reported, as well as violence against religious leaders.

A new conversion law was adopted in January 2015. It will make the process of registering religious conversions cumbersome by requiring anyone intent on changing their religion to submit an application to an 11-member committee.¹²³

Five religious organisations have received official recognition in **China**: the Buddhist Association of China, Chinese Taoist Association, Islamic Association of China, Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Unregistered religious groups, such as Hui and Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong members and 'underground' Christian churches and house groups, have faced severe discrimination, harassment and persecution. The Chinese Communist Party still prohibits its members from engaging in any religious practices. Since the number of religious believers in China is estimated between 100 and 300 million people, on a total population of 1.4 billion, and most believers do not belong to any of the officially recognised organisations and thus face daily discrimination and persecution, violation of freedom of religion or belief is widespread.

Generally, tolerance for Buddhism and Taoism is greater than that for other religions. Tibet is the main exception to this rule, with the Chinese government going to great lengths to discredit religious leaders, such as the Dalai Lama, whilst increasing government oversight of monasteries and securing the political loyalty of Buddhist monks.¹²⁴

Unregistered Protestants and Catholics may be subject to harassment or even detention and are pressured to join the state-sanctioned associations. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, there were over 400 reports of church demolitions in the Zhejiang province over 2014.¹²⁵

Particularly severe forms of persecution concern the Uighur Muslims, who concentrate in the province of Xinjiang and the members of the Falun Gong movement. Since 2013, the

¹²¹ New concerns rise over Burmese treatment of Rohingya Muslims, The Washington Post, 11 November 2014

(http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/new-concerns-rise-over-burmese-treatment-of-rohingya-muslims/2014/11/11/4c0f42fe-5947-11e4-9d6c-756a229d8b18_story.html)

¹²² Burma: Visit Report, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, April 2013, p. 12

¹²³ Myanmar: UN experts alarmed at draft bill imposing restrictions on religious conversion, UN News Centre, June 20, 2014

(<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48094#.VPIBs-Gm2io>)

¹²⁴ USCIRF, 2014 Annual Report: China, p. 47

¹²⁵ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Zhejiang Church Demolitions: Timeline of Events, February 2015 (<http://www.csw.org.uk/zhejiangtimeline>)

situation with respect to the Uighurs has escalated: whereas the Chinese government claims its measures to be targeting separatism and extremism, the Uighur community finds itself increasingly marginalised in a province that used to be populated primarily by them, but where now the Han Chinese are already estimated to constitute 40% of the population.¹²⁶ The persecution of the Falun Gong movement is based on the Chinese policies to ban groups that are considered 'evil cults'. Not only is the Falun Gong targeted, but so are many smaller Christian movements. About 2000 people are detained in re-education centres because of their religion or belief, and about 500 Falun Gong members serve prison sentences.¹²⁷

The largest religion in **India** is Hinduism (80%), followed by Islam (13,4%), and Christianity (2,3%), but there is also a significant Sikh community (1,9%) as well as Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Zoroastrians and Baha'is.

Whereas the federal laws protect freedom of religion or belief, especially worrisome are the anti-conversion laws introduced in various Indian states. According to these laws, the government must assess the legality of conversions and resort to prosecutions when the conversion is found to be a result of force, fraud, allurements or inducement. Although these laws were introduced under the pretext of reducing inter-religious tensions, their net effect has been that hostility towards religious minorities only increased. This resulted in numerous incidents of violence, as well as forced 'reconversions' to Hinduism.¹²⁸

Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country (87,2%), but there are also important Christian (9,9%), and Hindu (1,7%) minorities. The Indonesian Constitution recognises freedom of religion or belief only for six officially recognised religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

One of the most pressing problems in Indonesia is that the government cannot or does not want to act against the violence of radical Sunni Islamic groups against Muslims from other Islamic tendencies as well as against other religious and belief communities. Since the approval, in 2008, of a Joint Ministerial Decree requiring from Ahmadiyyas to halt all their activities,¹²⁹ this community has become the target of increasing violence. Ahmadiyya mosques were vandalised and closed.¹³⁰ Similarly, Shi'a and Sufi Muslims in Indonesia are regularly victims of social hostilities without the government offering the necessary protection.

¹²⁶ Emily Rauhala, China now says almost 100 were killed in Xinjiang violence, 4 August 2014 (<http://time.com/3078381/china-xinjiang-violence-shache-yarkand/>)

¹²⁷ USCIRF, 2014 Annual Report: China, p. 49

¹²⁸ 'Anti-Conversion Legislation: Summary of Concerns', Christian Solidarity Worldwide, November 2006, p. 2

¹²⁹ Indonesia to ban Ahmadi activities, Asia News, 9 July 2008 (<http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=12466&size=A>)

¹³⁰ USCIRF, 2014 Annual Report: Indonesia, p. 125

Violence not only hit minority Islamic groups, but also Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and atheists. Hindu and Buddhist temples, as well as churches were vandalised or forcibly closed, with the situation being particularly severe in Aceh and West Java. Extremist groups and local government officials also delayed or denied permits for the building or renovation of churches.

The blasphemy law, stemming from 1965, has been used to disband the Ahmadiyyahs and to intimidate individuals, especially those who advocate atheism.¹³¹

Since 2003, the Indonesian government allows the provincial authorities in Aceh to apply a local interpretation of Sharia law. This has led to strict enforcement of rules concerning dress codes, gambling, alcohol and pork consumption, unchaperoned male-female liaisons. These rules are applied to all, irrespective of one's religion or belief. Moreover, Shi'a Muslims, Sufis and Ahmadiyyas are banned and attacks on adherents of these religions are occurring with impunity. Christian churches and Buddhist temples were forcibly closed down.¹³²

Most people in **Kazakhstan** are Muslims (70%), 26% are (mainly Russian Orthodox) Christians, and 3% atheists. Respect for the freedom of religion or belief continued to decline in 2014. The main problems arise from the Religion Law which was introduced in 2011. New, complex registration requirements were introduced, which led the number of registered religious organisations to decline from 46 to 17.¹³³

A preferential position is given to Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity. In addition, Kazakhstan operates state-funded anti-sect centres whose primary purpose is the active suppression of certain minority religious communities deemed to be 'destructive'. In particular, the Ahmadi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Hare Krishnas have been targeted as such.¹³⁴

Government censorship is imposed on all religious materials. In the case of Islamic religious materials, an additional level of censorship is present through the officially-sponsored Muslim Board. In practice, only Islamic literature from the Sunni Hanafi school can be distributed.¹³⁵

The dominant religion in **Malaysia** is Islam (61,3%), followed by Buddhism (19,8%), Christianity (9,2%) and Hinduism (6,3%). The Constitution considers Islam to be the state religion, but also stipulates that other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony. Furthermore, the Constitution defines ethnic Malays as (Sunni) Muslims from birth. Other forms of Islam are

¹³¹ *Policing Belief: the Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights: Indonesia (October 2010)*, Freedom House, p. 46

¹³² USCIRF, 2014 Annual Report: Indonesia, p. 126

¹³³ USCIRF, 2014 Annual Report: Kazakhstan, p. 129

¹³⁴ Forum 18, Kazakhstan: Great political efforts are made, 6 May 2011 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1568)

¹³⁵ "Kazakhstan: Bookshop censorship, ban on all non-Hanafi Sunni Muslim literature", Forum 18, 21 February 2013 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1804)

illegal. Conversion from Sunni Islam is a crime in seven provinces. Whereas Muslims are permitted to proselytise non-Muslims, non-Muslims rarely have the freedom to proselytise Muslims.¹³⁶

Particularly grave is the plight of the Shi'a, Ahmadiyya, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses' and the Church of the Latter Day Saints communities. The government tries to convert members of these groups and occasionally arrests them, if they do not comply. The government moreover incites hatred, for example, by blaming Christians and Jews for causing divisions within the Muslim communities.¹³⁷

Although the population of the **Maldives** is composed of various religious communities, the Constitution of the country not only recognises Islam as the state religion, but also makes its practice mandatory on all Maldivian citizens.¹³⁸ Whereas Islam represents 60% of the population, there are also important religious minorities: Buddhists (20%), Christians (9%), Hindus (6%) and adherents of Confucianism, Taoism or other Chinese philosophies (1,3%).

Non-(Sunni)Muslims may not vote or hold public positions.¹³⁹ The government sees to it that both schools and mosques proclaim the Sunni version of Islam. This means that freedom of expression is non-existent, whenever manifestations of this freedom it may be considered 'undermining religious unity.'¹⁴⁰ Political opponents of the government are regularly accused of not being faithful to Islamic values.

Religious minorities become victim of repression, inter alia, by searches by government officials of their houses for 'un-Islamic' books, pictures and CDs. Vigilant mobs have been known to abduct Maldivian citizens suspected of being irreligious. They are subsequently interrogated and tested on their knowledge of Islam.¹⁴¹

Although **North Korea's** constitution officially protects freedom of religion or belief, in practice there is no such freedom. As part of its policy to control every part of North Korea's society, the central government uses the restriction mentioned in the constitution that "freedom of religion should not be used for purposes of dragging in foreign powers or endangering public security" to prohibit any manifestation of religions or beliefs, other than the government's version of atheism combined with the personality cult built around its leader.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138

¹³⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Maldives, ch.II, art.17(a), 67(g)

¹³⁹ US Department of State, Maldives 2013 International Religious Freedom Report, p. 2

¹⁴⁰ Religious Freedom In The Republic Of Maldives, The Institute on Religion & Public Policy (http://iib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session9/MV/IRPP_InstituteonReligionandPublicPolicy.pdf)

¹⁴¹ Vigilante mobs abduct young men in push to identify online secular activists, Minivan Press, 9 June 2014

(<http://minivannews.com/politics/vigilante-mobs-abduct-young-men-in-push-to-identify-online-secular-activists-86720>)

Contrary to reports of human rights organisations, the government upholds that there are four state-controlled religions (various forms of Christianity) as well as religious education institutions serving not only Christianity but also Buddhism, including its Korean version, i.e. Chondogyo, and Islam. In practice, churches and Buddhist temples exist, but they only serve as tourist attractions and are not to be used by believers.¹⁴² It is reported that Christians are routinely sent to labour camps and referred to as 'crazy people'.¹⁴³ It is estimated that 50,000 to 70,000 Christians are held in such camps.¹⁴⁴

Around 95% of the **Pakistani** population is Muslim, 75% of whom belong to the Sunni version of Islam, the remainder being either Shi'a or Ahmadi Muslims. Other religions and beliefs (Hindus, Christians, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jews and non-theistic and atheistic believers) constitute 5% of the population.

The main two problems in Pakistan in regard of freedom of religion or belief are on the one hand the application of blasphemy law, and on the other hand the lack of protection of religious and belief communities against violence from other groups.

The legal framework offers very few guarantees for the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief. All rights are subject to 'law, public order and morality.' Moreover, the country adheres to an extremely strict Shari'a codex and Ahmadiyya are considered to be non-Muslims, which is contrary to their own beliefs.¹⁴⁵

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are commonly abused, with accusations made as acts of revenge, commercial coercion or to settle personal disputes. Famous is the case of Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five sentenced to death by hanging for 'defaming the Prophet.' In October 2014, the High Court dismissed her appeal and upheld her death sentence. The case is now being taken to the Supreme Court.¹⁴⁶

In 2014, Hindus faced a surge of violence directed against them. The same holds for Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims as well as Christians. It is said that due to the close ties between the current Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, and Saudi Arabia, the lack of action on militant violence against minorities is likely to be attributed to his Sunni militant Islamist sympathies.¹⁴⁷

Both the arbitrary application of the blasphemy laws and the lack of protection against violence, make life for members of religious minorities particularly harsh and dangerous:

¹⁴² Religion and Belief in the DPRK, December 2014, p. 18

(<https://freedomdeclared.org/media/Religion-and-Belief-in-the-DPRK-APPG-on-FoRB-report-Dec-2014.pdf>)

¹⁴³ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) Country Profile, North Korea 2014 (http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/country.asp?s=gi&urn=North_Korea)

¹⁴⁴ Opendoors, North Korea Magazine, January 2014, p. 12

(http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/north_korea/documents/Jan_2014_Magazine.pdf)

¹⁴⁵ Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 14 August, 1973 (<http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part1.html>)

¹⁴⁶ Pakistan court upholds Asia Bibi death sentence, BBC, 16 October 2014 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29640245>)

¹⁴⁷ Hindu temple set on fire in Pakistan over blasphemy, Reuters, 16 March 2014

(<http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/03/16/pakistan-hindu-temple-fire-idINDEEA2F07G20140316>)

most of them are discriminated against to the point of being marginalised and many have to fear for their lives.

All of this takes place in a context where rule of law exists only to some extent in certain parts of the country. In many areas local leaders or extremist groups like the Pakistani Taliban determine the extent to which central government control is accepted, including in matters of FoRB and human rights in general.

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country (70% of the population), with important Hindu (15%), Christian (8%) and Muslim (7%) minorities. In 2014, violent attacks against religious minorities increased. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups, such as Bodu Bala Sena, allegedly supported by the government, discriminated against and attacked, in particular, Muslims and Christians. In addition, Sunni Muslims stepped up their attacks of the very small Ahmadi Muslim community in the country.¹⁴⁸ Whether intentionally or not, fact is that the government does not offer protection to the religious minorities in the country, whereas the situation on the ground tends to worsen.

More than 90% of the population of **Tajikistan** is Muslim. Other religious minorities include Christians (2%), Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses and Jews. Officially, Tajikistan is a secular country.

The main problem in respect of the protection of freedom of religion or belief are the registration laws. Unregistered communities are not allowed to manifest their religion or belief in public, and even private worshipping in community with others is forbidden. Furthermore, the right of freedom of religion or belief of minors is severely curtailed by that prohibition for anyone under the age of 18 to attend organised religious activities except funerals. The production, importation, export and sale of religious materials is only legally possible for registered religious groups, but must be approved and is controlled by the government in advance.¹⁴⁹

Since 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses have been completely banned by the government, because of their opposition to military service.¹⁵⁰ Despite several attempts, including a complaint to the UN, registration remains to be withheld to this religious community.

About 75% of the **Kyrgyz Republic's** population is Muslim, mostly Sunni's, and 20% are Russian Orthodox. Smaller religious and belief communities include other Christian denominations, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Buddhists and Baha'is.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ US Department of State, Tajikistan 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom.

¹⁵⁰ Tajikistan: Jehovah's Witnesses banned, Forum 18, 18 October 2007 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1036)

All religious communities have to be registered in order to be able to manifest their freedom of religion or belief. Even the main religions have difficulty in getting (re)registered and smaller religious communities are withheld registration altogether. Moreover, some groups, such as the Ahmadi Muslims were not only withheld registration, but were branded as a potential threat to national security.

Turkmenistan is a predominantly (89%) Sunni Muslim country, with (Orthodox) Christians coming in second (9%). Other, smaller, religious communities include: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, and Evangelical Christians.

All religious communities are required to register with the government. Many applications from Shi'a Muslim, Armenian Apostolic Church, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses have been rejected. Religious activities by unregistered organisations are illegal and punishable by law.¹⁵¹

The government organises raids against both registered and unregistered religious communities. In addition, religious minorities are being discriminated against.

In **Uzbekistan**, it is estimated that 93% of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni's, with a small Shi'a minority. Of the remaining 7%, 4% belong to the Russian Orthodox Church and the remaining religious minorities are Evangelical Christians, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, Jews and atheists.

All religious groups are required to register. The requirements for registration are as severe as to make it possible for most religious minorities to meet these.¹⁵² Unregistered communities do not have the right to manifest their freedom of religion or belief. Anti-extremism laws have been exploited to prosecute peaceful religious adherents who pose no credible threat to security.¹⁵³ Certain groups and associations have been banned altogether as being 'extremists.' Protestant groups are seen as dangerous and are subject to harsh monitoring, including police raids.

¹⁵¹ Turkmenistan World Report 2014, Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/turkmenistan>)

¹⁵² USCIRF, 2014 Annual Report: Uzbekistan, p. 99

¹⁵³ US Department of State, 2013 International Religious Freedom Report: Uzbekistan.

Non-EU Europe

Since the mandate of the intergroup is limited to non-EU countries, the part of the report on Europe is limited as well to those States who are not members of the European Union. Again, those countries have been selected that stand out, as the situation in respect of freedom of religion or belief is particularly cumbersome.

The population of **Azerbaijan** consists mostly of Muslims (96%, of which about two thirds Shi'a and one third Sunni). However, there are also many religious minorities: Christians, Jews, Baha'is, non-believers, as well as adherents of Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna.

Registration of religious communities is compulsory. Official state permission is necessary for group activities of any size that have the purpose of expressing religious belief and expression. Groups that are particularly targeted are minority religious groups and strains of Islam not officially sanctioned by the State. A number of cases have been reported of police raids into ceremonies and congregations of Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses meetings.¹⁵⁴

With 68% of the population of **Belarus** belonging to the Belarussian Orthodox Church, this is by far the largest religious community in the country. Other religious communities are Roman Catholics (14%) and a range of other, religious minorities (3%): Protestants and other Christians, Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, and Baha'is. 15% of the population does not belong to a religious community.

Under the 2002 Religion Law, all religious communities are required to register with the State and have geographical limits placed on their activities. All houses of worship must have state permission, which is rarely given. Orthodox and Catholic communities face less restrictions than Protestants and other, smaller religious communities. Often, the State sees religious activities as potentially dangerous, especially if they are seen as opposition against the government.¹⁵⁵

Statistics on religious communities in **Russia** are unreliable, but it is generally held that most Russians belong to the Orthodox Church. The largest minority are Muslims (estimated at 7%), followed by Protestants, Catholics and other Christians, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Baha'is, Hare Krishnas and others. Altogether these and other religious and belief communities are estimated at representing 5% of the population.

Manifestations of freedom of religion and belief have become increasingly difficult, after new legislation increasingly restricted this freedom. The strict 2012 laws against

¹⁵⁴ Azerbaijan Religious freedom survey, Form 18, April 2012 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1690)

¹⁵⁵ USCIRF 2014 Annual Report, p. 153

unauthorised public meetings were mainly aimed at political rallies, but had a markedly negative impact on freedom of worship.¹⁵⁶ In 2014, amendments to the anti-extremism laws further worsened the situation, especially for Muslims and minority Christian groups. Since tensions between Russia and the Western world increased, especially Protestant groups were targeted, as they were seen to be associated with the US and the EU. The overall negative and worsening situation in Russia with respect to freedom of religion or belief has aided the rise of xenophobic attacks against religious and belief minorities and the growth of anti-Semitism during 2014.¹⁵⁷

Under the anti-extremism law many Muslims, especially in the North Caucasus region have been arrested without clear evidence for extremist activity. This held in particular for followers of Said Nursi, a Turkish Muslim theologian.¹⁵⁸ In addition to this group, many Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon groups faced oppression under the Extremism Law.¹⁵⁹ The Russian Orthodox Church, on the contrary, has a privileged status and is supported by the state in building churches and in organising religious activities.¹⁶⁰

Most (99%) of **Turkey's** citizens are Muslims, consisting of followers of the Hanafi school of thought, but with a large minority of Alevis and a smaller community of Shi'a Muslims. The remaining 1% consists of Christians, Baha'is, Yazidis and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Although freedom of religion has been recognised in the Turkish constitution and officially Turkey is a secular state, in practice Sunni Muslims are given preferential treatment. Of the religious minorities, Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews and Greek Orthodox Christians tend to be better protected than other religious communities. The constitution requires State control over religion. Islamic institutions in the country are controlled by the government through the 'Directorate of Religious Affairs', which is responsible for regulating all mosques and employing all imams. The government officially limits rights of ownership of places of worship and religious education of clergy.

Since the AKP's rise to power in 2002, concerns have grown over rights of religious minorities, whose position has in many ways deteriorated. It is generally held that in 2014, the situation of religious and belief communities in Turkey has significantly worsened: the native Christian population and openly atheist Turkish citizens are most at risk from current government policy.¹⁶¹ A number of openly negative statements by AKP officials concerning atheists have been made in 2013 and 2014 and under Turkish law, the open denial of religious belief is considered a criminal offence and can lead to a prison sentence.

The Alevi community has often faced official and social discrimination by other Muslims and government officials. No progress has been made with respect to registering Alevi cem

¹⁵⁶ USCIRF 2014 Annual Report, pp. 141-143

¹⁵⁷ Berkley Center, Religious Freedom in Russia

¹⁵⁸ Forum 18, Russia: Pre-trial detentions of Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses, 7 July 2010 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1464)

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁰ IHEU, Freedom of Thought 2014, pp. 419-421

¹⁶¹ Freedom of Thought 2014, IHEU, p. 387

houses as official places of worship. Since the government does not consider Alevis Muslims to be true Muslims, cem houses have no legal justification for registration.¹⁶²

Religious minorities often face administrative and legal burdens that hinder their ability to operate freely. Christian communities face difficulties in obtaining building permits required to legally operate their places of worship. As of 2014, no religious community has legal personality with often severe consequences. In 2014, the Santa Maria Church in Izmir had to transfer its possessions to the state, since it did not have legal personality and consequently could not claim property ownership.

¹⁶² TURKEY: Religious freedom survey, Forum 18, January 2014

Highlight: Violence against places of worship and holy places

Acts of discrimination or violence against religious or belief communities occur in various forms and are committed by state, and non-state actors alike. Actions are not only directed against people, but increasingly also target places of worship and holy places, whereas the right to maintain such places is explicitly guaranteed in international human rights instruments as part of the freedom of religion or belief. This reflects the importance of such places for religious and belief communities. Against this background, the Intergroup decided to focus in this annual report on this particular aspect of freedom to manifest one's religion or belief.

The effects of destruction of places of worship and holy places cannot easily be overestimated: they have fostered a climate of fear and intimidation in various countries, thus threatening existing ethnic and religious pluralism and in some instances they have led to ethnic and religious cleansing.

International and human rights law on protection of places of worship and holy places

In accordance with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) "everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching." Art. 6 (a) of the 1981 Declaration of the United Nations General Assembly further defines the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief and states that this includes the freedom, "to worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes."

In accordance with the ICCPR, states are not only required to refrain from any violations of the freedom to establish and maintain places of worship and assembly, but they also have to protect these places against sacrilege, damage or destruction by non-state actors.

The state also has a duty to make sure that perpetrators are prosecuted for any such acts. Non-state actors who operate outside state controlled areas, are nevertheless bound by international law, humanitarian law and international criminal law.

State actors

In most countries, the government protects at least some places of worship or holy places. Even North Korea, where freedom of religion or belief is non-existent, has a few temples which it shows to the outside world as 'places of worship', but which are in practice only 'tourist attractions'. However, many governments discriminate among

religious and belief communities and only recognise places of worship or assembly of one or more officially recognised religions and beliefs. The use of discriminatory policies and legislation prevents religious or belief communities from having places of worship or assembly or results in forced closures of existing places. In countries, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, only the official State religion acquires the freedom to establish and maintain places of worship. Even if this freedom has been recognised in the constitution or by secondary law, this does not automatically guarantee the effective exercise of this freedom.

Restrictions can take many different forms and may relate to:

Restrictive definitions of places of worship or assembly

Legal systems will often provide a definition of a 'place of worship or assembly' with strict limitations meant to exclude religious or belief minorities. This in turn means that minorities are forced to worship in places not designated for such purposes and thus leaves them open to criminal prosecution. In certain countries, this holds even for worshipping in private homes.

Registration and authorisation

States may hold that religious or belief groups have to register with the government, and then must apply for authorisation for various activities, such as building and maintaining a place of worship. Many Eastern European countries, including Russia, use this instrument of registration. Although, for example, the OSCE has recently confirmed that freedom to manifest one's religion or belief does not depend on registration, in practice the countries concerned use the registration and authorisation policies to control every activity of religious or belief communities. At any time, the state can revoke the right to worship by annulling the registration of the religious or belief community concerned. Any group which seeks to avoid either registration or authorisation is then acting outside the limits of the law and could be subjected to criminal charges.

Permissible limitations

In accordance with international law, the State may restrict freedom to manifest one's religion or belief only if this is necessary in a democratic society for the protection of public safety, public order (*ordre public*), health, morals, and the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. In the case of the freedom to establish and maintain places of worship and assembly, such limitations may be based on zoning and planning requirements and may affect the external appearance of a place of worship or a burial ground, and its dimension. Additionally, the sources of funding for the establishment of a place of worship may be restricted (for example, no donations from abroad may be accepted). Such limitations when applied in a discriminatory fashion may be just as restrictive as an outright ban on places of worship. Such limitations are commonly used in both Pakistan and China. An example of this is Zhejiang province in China. During 2014, 130 crosses were removed due to apparent height violations.

With local authorities being the primary administrators over such limitations, national governments often attempt to pass the blame on misguided local officials in order to cover up official government policies.

Social hostility – non-state actors

Non-state actors regularly target places of worship, sites and symbols. Many of the violent acts committed by non-state actors against religious or belief minority groups are fuelled by discriminatory laws and regulations advocated by the state. These policies of exclusion foster impunity and silence for crimes committed against religious or belief minority groups and their places of worship, religious sites and symbols.

Social hostility is pervasive in many countries and is often centred on places of worship. The spectrum of hostility is broad including community involvement and intensity variable from the individual and personal, to mob attacks. Examples of this are an individual leaving a note on the door of a synagogue saying "Soon to be demolished" as happened in Turkey or a 300 strong mob surrounding an Assembly of God Church and lighting it on fire as happened in Sri Lanka.

Other instances of social hostility include:

- The razing of Hindu temples by Muslim extremist mobs in Bangladesh
- Christian church bombings by Muslim extremists in Pakistan
- The grafting and burning of mosques and Christian churches in Israel by radical Jewish groups
- Hindu extremist attacks on minority places of worship in India
- The ten churches and three mosques that were attacked in Malaysia over the past five years

The tendency is to believe that social hostility and harassment is isolated to countries without a strong sense of religious or belief freedom or a commitment to pluralism. However, social hostility is prevalent in western countries. In Europe and North America, Muslims feel marginalised in the face of local opposition to build a mosque and humiliated when their mosques are desecrated by pig heads. Hostility of this kind, no matter what the intensity or scale, has the same debilitating effects in every community. Individuals and groups are made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome and the feeling that they do not belong.

Protection

Protection may be given to individuals who deface, violate, or otherwise participate in illegal activity towards a place of worship. This protection often comes in the form of a state's failure to bring criminal charges against individuals or in finding them guilty of only minor offences and sheltering them from harsh punishments. States will not often openly acknowledge this practice but in the most extreme cases this may be the case. The revolutionary courts of Iran have long held that criminal charges may not be brought against individual who perpetrate acts of violence against Baha'i or their property.

With the increased number of failed states, non-state-actors operating in areas which are not state-controlled anymore, have been particularly aggressive against places of worship

and holy places of religious and belief communities. Whereas there is no protection possible from a central government, the international community nevertheless has a responsibility in this regard. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) non-state actors such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and IS have taken control over large areas and have implemented their own law. They have committed possible war crimes, such as ethnic and religious cleansing and crimes against humanity through violence and the destruction of places of worship, religious sites and symbols.

Examples are numerous.

- Churches and mosques are preferred targets for the Militia group Boko Haram, with the suicide bombing of a mosque in Kano Nigeria being the most devastating.
- Buddhist cultural sites have been destroyed in Afghanistan by Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups, most notably with the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyn.
- Christian churches and Jewish synagogues have been systematically demolished in territory controlled by the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq.
- The Islamic State has also gained a reputation for destroying many ancient emblems of Iraqi history and culture, including almost all the artefacts in the Museum of Mosul, many of which dated to the 7th century BC.

These non-state actors pose a specific threat to places of worship, religious sites and symbols. As these groups often lack any legitimacy outside of the areas they control, they use force, as they control or seek to control, to destruct places of worship of religious or belief groups that oppose them. This serves the dual purposes of giving them the semblance of religious purity, thus legitimacy, and gives them an opportunity to display their power and get international publicity. A concerning result of this is that religious or belief minorities have to leave areas, under control of extra-state actors, that they have lived in for centuries.

Freedom of religion or belief in EU foreign policy

In our previous report we analysed the mechanisms and actions taken by the EU to promote FoRB in foreign policy. In this section we will emphasise the latest developments (2014-2015).

FoRB has been quite prominently on the EU agenda over the past year. The rise of violence and extremism, and threats, in particular coming from the Middle East, have focused the attention of several European Council meetings and institutional departments. Many EU leaders and policymakers are focusing on prioritising FoRB, together with other human rights, such as freedom of association and freedom of expression. The EU has been active in improving policy cohesion, aiming to ensure that agreements on trade and cooperation with non-EU countries contain human rights conditionality clauses, including FoRB.

The European Union is becoming an increasingly significant transnational actor in promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief. The EU raised FoRB violations through Foreign Affairs Council conclusions, diplomatic action, statements, political and human rights dialogues.

- In its conclusions on Syria in April 2014 the Council expressed concern “about the worsening plight of ethnic and religious minorities, noting that Christians are increasingly targeted by extremist groups.”¹⁶³
- In the EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democratisation (June 2014)¹⁶⁴, the EEAS underlines its work in strengthening the context of FoRB in multilateral fora.
- In its conclusions on Iraq in August 2014 the Council condemned “the atrocities and abuses of basic human rights, in particular when committed against targeted religious minorities.”¹⁶⁵
- At the EU Council meeting in February 2015, European leaders stated that they “will also continue to advocate Freedom of Religion or Belief and will call for greater efforts to protect the rights of persons belonging to religious minorities.”¹⁶⁶
- The EU Council adopted the conclusions on the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat (March 2015)¹⁶⁷, condemning violence against religious and ethnic groups in the region.

The EEAS has made a number of FoRB statements, including on:

¹⁶³ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/142212.pdf

¹⁶⁴ http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/docs/2013_hr_report_en.pdf

¹⁶⁵ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/144311.pdf

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2015/02/09/>

¹⁶⁷ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/03/16-council-conclusions-eu-regional-strategy-for-syria-and-iraq-as-well-as-the-isil-daesh-threat/>

- the killing of Father Frans Van der Lugt, SJ in Homs, Syria (April, 2014)¹⁶⁸
- the death sentence passed for apostasy in Sudan (May, 2014)¹⁶⁹
- Meriam Yahya Ibrahim, a Sudanese believer sentenced to death for apostasy (June, 2014)¹⁷⁰
- the situation in northern Iraq (August, 2014)¹⁷¹
- the case of Asia Bibi¹⁷² (October, 2014)¹⁷³
- the attack against the Central Mosque in Kano, Nigeria (November, 2014)¹⁷⁴
- the attack in the Har Nof synagogue (November, 2014)¹⁷⁵
- the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya¹⁷⁶ (February 2015)
- the terrorist attacks against two churches in Lahore¹⁷⁷ (March 2015)

The EU has furthermore called on all countries to revoke laws that imprison or discriminate against persons who leave or change their religion or belief, especially if punishable by the death sentence.¹⁷⁸

The EU expressed its financial support to civil society active in FoRB promotion through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Regulation for 2014 to 2020.¹⁷⁹

The EU stressed the importance of addressing freedom of religion or belief at the UN Human Rights Council and at the UN General Assembly. *"The EU attaches great importance to the fact that the Council remains seized with the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief, which remains a very high priority under the EU's human rights policy. Individuals discriminated because of their religion or belief are at the core of our attention,"* stated Ambassador Peter Sørensen, Head of the EU Delegation to the UN in Geneva.¹⁸⁰

¹⁶⁸ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140408_07_en.pdf

¹⁶⁹ http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140515_01_en.pdf

¹⁷⁰ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-14-186_en.htm

¹⁷¹ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140804_03_en.pdf

¹⁷² http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/141018_01_en.pdf

¹⁷³ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-716_en.htm

¹⁷⁴ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2014/141128_01_en.htm

¹⁷⁵ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2014/141118_01_en.htm

¹⁷⁶ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150216_01_en.htm

¹⁷⁷ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150315_02_en.htm

¹⁷⁸ http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140515_01_en.pdf

¹⁷⁹ http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/frb/index_en.htm

¹⁸⁰ http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un_geneva/press_corner/focus/events/2015/20150310_forb_en.htm

- The EU Delegation to the UN office organised consultations with NGOs to prepare the Universal Periodic Review (April, 2015)¹⁸¹. FoRB was one of the key concerns.
- At the 28th UNHRC the European Union raised FoRB issues¹⁸². The EU-led resolution underlined the importance of FoRB in addressing tension, intolerance and violence based on religion or belief.
- During the abovementioned session the EU delegation held a dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief¹⁸³

The EU also raised FoRB issue at the UN General Assembly.

- In November 2014 at the 69th UN General Assembly, the EU emphasised the initiatives focusing on protection of the rights of religious minorities around the world.¹⁸⁴

However, the EU needs to do a lot more in order to address discrimination and violence against religious or belief communities in many third countries.

Since the adoption of the EU FoRB Guidelines in 2013, EU officials are encouraged to look into implementation of the tools and instruments available in the guidelines. The EEAS organised training sessions on religious literacy and ability to deal with religions for diplomats, officials and policymakers at headquarters and in the field. The training focused on increasing the understanding of the role of religion in foreign policy. EEAS staff is in the process of being equipped to identify and understand tensions and conflicts between religious communities.

HR/VP Federica Mogherini in her letter to the Intergroup said that "since the adoption of the guidelines, the EU has been indeed stressing FoRB principles on numerous occasions, in international fora (with efforts deployed to strengthen human rights language in the EU - led resolutions on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly), and in the exercise of the EU's bilateral engagement with third countries, notably during the Human Rights annual dialogues. Furthermore, the EU closely follows the difficult situation of particular individuals and, when deemed useful, raises them directly in bilateral talks."¹⁸⁵ The HR/VP has mentioned FoRB as one of the three human rights she would prioritise¹⁸⁶.

However, the EU FoRB Guidelines are far from being fully implemented in the work of the EEAS staff, Member States diplomats at the headquarters and in Delegations. During discussions and meetings with EEAS officials and Member States representatives it was mentioned that the EU guidelines are not always consulted and used on the ground. The

¹⁸¹ http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un_geneva/press_corner/all_news/news/2015/20150416_upr_en.htm

¹⁸² http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un_geneva/press_corner/focus/events/2015/20150327_hrc28_en.htm

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¹⁸⁴ http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_15792_en.htm

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/file/2015/04/HRVP-Response.pdf>

¹⁸⁶ <http://www.elections2014.eu/resources/library/media/20141022RES75841/20141022RES75841.pdf>

guidelines will be evaluated in 2016 based on the reports submitted by Heads of Mission and after consultations with society and relevant academic experts.

In 2015 the EU will renew its Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. It will be an opportunity to review EU initiatives on FoRB and submit new ways to promote and protect FoRB in EU external action.

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament continues to express its commitment to FoRB in non-EU countries. Numerous events and meetings have been hosted by MEPs in 2014-2015, especially dedicated to the urgent issue of persecution of religious minorities in Iraq and Syria.

Resolutions have been adopted on:

- The situation in Iraq and Syria and the IS offensive including the persecution of minorities¹⁸⁷ (September 2014)
- The humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria, in particular in the IS context¹⁸⁸ (February, 2015)
- Recent attacks and abductions by Da'esh in the Middle East, notably of Assyrians¹⁸⁹ (March 2015)

The European Parliament also adopted the latest Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world 2013 and the EU policy on the matter¹⁹⁰ (March 2015). The report included a detailed section on freedom of religion or belief, on persecution of numerous religious or belief minorities. However, the list was not exhaustive and it did not mention the persecution of for instance Baha'is, Hindus and atheists. The report did not include several important amendments tabled by the Intergroup, including on the involvement of the European Parliament and civil society in FoRB training organized by EEAS and Member States.

The European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT

In December 2014, the European Parliament Conference of Presidents approved the EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT among the 28 official Intergroups. The Intergroup is composed of MEPs from almost all political groups in the European Parliament.

The intergroup monitors FoRB in non-EU countries and ensures that necessary actions are taken to address serious FoRB violations. The Intergroup also closely monitors the work of EU institutions on FoRB issues, reminding the EU and Member States of their obligations to promote and protect FoRB in their external action. The Intergroup together with the EU

¹⁸⁷ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2014-0027&language=EN>

¹⁸⁸ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2015-0040&language=EN>

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2015-0071&language=EN&ring=B8-2015-0253>

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2015-0076&language=EN&ring=A8-2015-0023>

institutions encourage third countries to comply with their commitments under articles 18 of UDHR and ICCPR.

The Intergroup works closely with civil society, European and national counterparts, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and Canada's Office of Religious Freedom.

The Intergroup carries out its activities by organising events, writing reports, amendments, parliamentary questions, letters and press releases.

The intergroup organised events¹⁹¹:

- In January 2015: "What do MEPs do with their beliefs?" and on Persecution of Christians in the World;
- In February 2015: the ODIHR/Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities Launch event

The intergroup submitted the following parliamentary questions¹⁹²:

- In December 2014 on Baha'is in Iran
- In January 2015 on abduction and forced conversion of Hindu girls in Pakistan

The Intergroup made statements on¹⁹³:

- on the situation of Freedom of religion or belief in Pakistan (December 2014)
- protecting religious or belief minorities in the MENA region as ISIS attacks Christian villages in Syria (February 2015)
- on the murder of 21 Coptic Christians in Libya (February 2015)

The intergroup held meetings with representatives of the civil society, Member States diplomats, and ambassadors. The intergroup will continue its work to strengthen the role and place of FoRB in the EU's external policies.

¹⁹¹ <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/events/>

¹⁹² <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/our-work/parliamentary-questions/>

¹⁹³ <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/our-work/press-releases/>

Institutional recommendations

The European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB & RT closely followed the work of EEAS on the promotion and protection of FoRB in external policies in 2014-2015. The Intergroup also has been active in dialogue processes with EEAS staff, Member States officials and civil society in what concerns the implementation of the EU FoRB guidelines. In the previous Annual Report concrete steps were suggested. Although some progress has been made, many of the recommendations still need to be implemented.

Therefore the Intergroup strongly recommends EEAS to step up their efforts in further implementation of the actions suggested in the last Annual report.

In addition to those recommendations, the Intergroup proposes the following recommendations:

Implementation of the EU Guidelines on freedom of religion or belief:

- EU and Member States representatives in the field and headquarters are urged to use the various tools presented in the EU FoRB Guidelines, in particular reporting on general and specific situations, demarches and public diplomacy. Close cooperation with various actors and stakeholders, both locally as well as internationally, is essential. The Intergroup recommends the EEAS to urge all countries that do not currently accept requests for visits from the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB to do so in the near future.
- FoRB training for EU policymakers and diplomats has to be further developed. The Intergroup recommends making FoRB training mandatory for at least one staff member per EU delegation in at risk countries. The Intergroup expresses its willingness to contribute to these trainings if and when required

Developing better policy cohesion:

- Respect for freedom of religion or belief should be systematically monitored as part of the Human Rights Impact Assessments that are carried out before the EU decides to conclude new bilateral trade and investment agreements. When gross and persistent FoRB violations occur, no such agreements should be concluded. In the case of less severe violations, freedom of religion or belief should be put on the agenda of the human rights dialogue most of these agreements foresee, for as long as the violations continue.
- In 2015 the EU is renewing its Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. The Intergroup is deeply disappointed in the lack of commitment to FoRB in the first drafts that were circulated. Even though FoRB is identified as one of the areas requiring '*renewed political commitment and additional efforts*', not a single action point on the protection of FoRB can be found. The Intergroup strongly recommends the inclusion of specific action points, as also presented in our letter to the EU High Representative. We recommend:

- A thorough evaluation of the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief;
- The development of country-specific FoRB strategies in order to step up the EU's efforts to protect freedom of religion or belief;
- Support for civil society organisations, including religious or belief organisations, who help in promoting freedom of religion or belief.
- Under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights Regulation for 2014-2020, the EU is financially supporting civil society projects aiming at combating and preventing FoRB violence and discrimination, especially with the focus on countries where the right to leave or change religion is penalised. The Intergroup welcomes the support and is looking forward to the mid-term review report on the achievements.

Engagement between policymakers and religious leaders:

- The Intergroup encourages EU Policymakers to engage with religious leaders. Moderate leaders often hold the key to genuine and reconciliation processes in countries and regions torn by religiously motivated conflict. Furthermore, religious leaders can play an important role in the prevention of radicalisation.

Country-specific recommendations

Failed states

Although we certainly realize that the term "failed states" in itself is worth a discussion, we bypass this discussion and do use this term here. Because we really think in relation to freedom of religion or belief, it must be mentioned that we face failed states. Failed states in general show great instability in many aspects of society (absence rule of law; strong internal political, social and/or economic pressures; increasing violence; almost no legitimate authority to make collective decisions; inability to provide public services etc.). The effect on freedom of religion or belief is that religious and belief minorities are outlawed: they are unprotected and attacked, people are kidnapped into slavery and/or murdered, not rarely in unimaginable ways. Further effects on freedom of religion or belief are: destruction of places of worship and religious sites such as cemeteries; attacks on believers going to and/or coming from religious meetings; police-forces that are unable and/or unwilling to protect believers and their right on freedom of religion, etc.

Important too is that in failed states other governments and/or international organisations have de facto no (decisive) influence. In the context of this report we refer of course to the European Union: the instruments the EU has (e.g. trade-agreements, various partnerships, cooperation agreements, direct development aid) have (almost) no effect on failed states or on freedom of religion in these states. EU diplomatic missions to these states are either impossible or they constantly remain without results. EU delegations can achieve little. Signed agreements between the EU and failed states are dead letters. Resolutions made up by the European Parliament without any effect at all. Only from time to time some severely persecuted believers could be released and brought to safe places. But this is exception, certainly not common.

One can discuss how many failed states we have on this globe. We avoid that discussion and make our own choice: in relation to freedom of religion or belief we consider Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia failed states. Warlords and groups like ISIS and many, many other armed groups determine everyday life. A central government might not even exist, and has either limited or no influence. Religious minorities have to fear for their lives daily, religious gatherings are under constant threats. The EU and other organisations can only offer aid from time to time: that is the maximum. Having said this we see that the possibility is eminent, that we will face more failed states, more instability, more threats to peace and freedom of religion or belief. These are very turbulent years for many parts of the world, and this trend is increasing.

Although there is no easy solution, the International Community should do its utmost to protect religious and belief communities against of non-state actors in failed states. In particular, the International Community should make sure that no weapon are sold to such actors and that in general no external funding is provided to them. In particular, they should be deprived of proceeds of selling of raw materials and artefacts, which is, for example, the main source of income for ISIL.

Brunei

EU cooperation with Brunei is part of the EU-ASEAN Agreement of 1980. However in 2009 the EU and Brunei began negotiating a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA).

Brunei has remained in a state of emergency since it was declared in 1962 and Islam is the state religion. The human rights situation and in particular the freedom of religion or belief remains of concern especially since the adoption of the new Sharia penal code in 2013 which limits freedom of religion or belief.

The Intergroup believes that the EU should reconsider negotiating the PCA with Brunei given the dire state of freedom of religion or belief and the adoption of the Sharia penal code.

Burma

After five decades of authoritarian rule, Burma has embarked on path of political reform. The government has started to make the transition to a democracy and released the opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's from house arrest and facilitated her party's return to the political battleground.

The EU lifted all restrictive measures, except those concerning arms, in response to the reforms undertaken by the government. The EU also restored Burma's GSP status and created the Comprehensive Framework and the joint EU-Myanmar Task Force, which provides EU support for further economic and political reforms.

Whilst the Intergroup acknowledges the reforms, the Intergroup remains concerned by legislation enacted by the Burmese government and continued state and social hostility against Rohingya Muslims and Chin Christians. The Intergroup urges the EU to pressure the Burmese government to repeal discriminatory legislation as well as establishing a truly independent judiciary and an accountable police force.

The Intergroup also recommends that the EU regularly raises issues with the Burmese government, and calls for periodical reassessments regarding Rohingyas and Chins.

The Intergroup calls on the EU to link the imposition/withdrawal of restrictive measures or the awarding of economic incentives on reforms and progress made by the Burmese government.

Central African Republic

The Intergroup is extremely concerned at the continued high level of tensions between Christian and Muslim communities in CAR, following the killings in 2013 and 2014. The Intergroup urges the EU and in particular France, to take the lead not only in the UN peacekeeping operation, but also in a reconciliation operation. The UN peacekeepers must

create safe conditions for the Muslims who fled their homes during the anti-balaka violence to return. The Intergroup also urges the EU to press the UN for further investigations into the religious and communal violence.

Eritrea

The EU and its Member States must point out to Eritrea the consequences of international obligations under conventions it signed, such as the ICCPR, and the contractual obligations regarding human rights under the Cotonou Agreement. The EU Guidelines on FoRB provide ample tools for action.

The Intergroup recommends stepping up pressure on the Eritrean government in particular with regard to prisoners of faith and conscience who often languish in terrible conditions and who must be immediately released. Furthermore Eritrea must recognize religious groups other than the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches and Sunni Islam, stop persecuting their members and adherents and allow these to freely practice their religion. Eritrea must also stop interfering in the affairs of the recognized religious communities and end the house arrest of Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios. The Intergroup asks the EEAS to press hard for the release of approximately 73 Jehovah's Witnesses detained in April 2014.

Iran

Since 2003 EU and Iranian relations have been dominated by the nuclear issue. With the recent nuclear breakthrough, the EU will most likely lift all restrictive measures as soon as Iran fulfils the conditions of any future agreement.

Whilst the Intergroup welcomes the nuclear deal, it remains concerned by the systemic, and institutionalised human rights violations. More over the intergroup is worried by the failure of Iran to abide with its own constitution and to comply with international commitments as a signatory to the ICCPR. The Intergroup is further troubled by the failure of Iran to protect religious or belief communities especially Christians and the continued persecution of Baha'is and their exclusion from civil life.

The Intergroup calls for the EU to mainstream human rights in all aspects of its relations with Iran and in particular press Iran to ensure that its legislation and practices fully conform with Article 18 of the ICCPR. The Intergroup believes that high-level and inclusive human rights dialogue with Iran should be part of any future political framework for bilateral EU-Iran relations and calls for the EU to start a human rights dialogue with Iran.

The Intergroup reminds the EU that some restrictive measures including travel bans and asset freezes were imposed on human rights grounds. It would therefore be appropriate for the EU to take unilateral actions or actions in multilateral-fora if there is a further deterioration in the freedom of religion or belief situation in the country.

Maldives

The EU's relations with the Maldives are not formalised in a Cooperation Agreement. The EU is the Maldives second largest trading partner and EU citizens are the second highest visitors to the Islands. The EU also provides support to the Maldives for climate change adaptation.

The Intergroup therefore urges the EU to press the Maldives government on the situation of freedom of religion or belief and the possibility of providing technical support and assistance in the field of freedom of religion or belief.

North Korea

Although the EU has established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 2001 and many Member States have diplomatic relations as well, meaningful dialogue with the regime is very difficult if not impossible. The Intergroup therefore recommends the EEAS and Member States to discuss the complete lack of freedom of religion or belief and terrible situation of religious groups and individual believers with key regional players, in particular China. The situation in North Korea should be addressed in political and human rights dialogues with this country. Furthermore the EEAS and Member States should consider speaking to South Korea about introducing a religious component in the reconciliation dialogue with the North. With regards to the sanctions regime, the Intergroup recommends including those engaged in gross human rights violations to be added to the travel ban and asset freeze list.

The Intergroup applauds the first discussions ever on North Korea's human rights record in the UN Security Council in November 2014. The Intergroup, whilst acknowledging the opposition by certain UNSC member states, strongly recommends a continuation of these discussions with a view to a possible referral of the North Korean case to the International Criminal Court. Also in the UN context, the EEAS and EU Member States should follow up on the FoRB recommendations made in North Korea's UPR. The EU should continue to work on a strongly worded annual UNGA resolution, ensuring a serious engagement from key regional players. Finally, the EU should take the lead in pushing for a human rights contact group for North Korea as recommended in the UN Commission of Inquiry's report. Discussions in the contact group should naturally also cover FoRB issues.

Pakistan

There are arguments to say that Pakistan is a failed state too. Mainly because we see more and more attacks from extremists against both official institutions and religious minorities. And this trend is ongoing. Having noticed this we pay attention to this country because the EU has a special relation with the government in Islamabad. The EU upgraded its General System of Preferences with Pakistan to a GSPplus status, effective from 1st January 2014. We call upon the EU Commission to effectively use the tool of the monitoring system related to this Agreement. And to frequently report on the outcomes of this monitoring, also to our Intergroup. And EU focus on the human right of freedom of religion intensively.

The situation in Pakistan related to freedom of religion in our opinion is worsening. Terrorist attacks, hate speeches, abuse of blasphemy laws and forced conversions are almost daily practices. Religious minorities like Ahmadi and Shi'a Muslims, Christians and Hindus face increasing attacks from Sunni extremists, and day to day discrimination. Especially the position of women and girls from these minorities is vulnerable: Asia Bibi is unfortunately an icon representing millions of women and girls. Girls and women, especially of religious minorities, face discrimination in education, and sexual violence.

We urge the EU to do whatever possible to improve religious tolerance in Pakistan. This means support to the government to set up a special police force for the protection of religious minorities. To repeal the blasphemy laws and particularly Articles 295 (B) and 295 (C) of the Pakistani Penal Code. To provide aid to introduce schoolbooks that promote religious tolerance. We urge the EU to intensify these efforts in order to prevent Pakistan from indeed becoming a failed state someday.

Saudi Arabia

The Intergroup is very concerned by the lack of serious engagement on human rights with Saudi Arabia. Geopolitical and economic interests seem to always prevail over other concerns. The EU and its Member States must not shirk back from criticizing Saudi Arabia for its total lack of freedom of religion or belief and its funding of intolerance abroad.

The EEAS and the EU Member States must insist on the introduction of internationally recognised freedom of religion or belief standards in the Kingdom. Blasphemy and apostasy laws must be abolished and persecution of religious minorities, in particular Ahmadi's immediately halted. Incitement to discrimination and hate in school text books must be removed. Past promises, such as those made in the 2006 U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions, must be honoured. The EU's commitment to human rights must be reflected in the language of the cooperation agreements it signs with Saudi Arabia, which is currently not the case.

Official and unofficial funding from Saudi Arabia's state institutions, as well as private individuals, of exponents of radical Wahhabi/Salafi interpretations of Islam is backfiring dramatically. The Kingdom probably does more harm through funding of radicalisation across the globe, than it does good through its actions to stop Al Qaida, ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist organisations. The EU together with other global partners must work with Saudi Arabia to stop financial flows from the Kingdom to radical individuals and organisations all over the world.

Sudan

The Intergroup is extremely concerned at the Sudanese regime's efforts of islamisation and arabisation. The Intergroup urges the EU to engage global partners for a joint effort to roll back this development. Specifically the Intergroup requests the Sudanese government to end the penalisation of apostasy and blasphemy and of conversion away from Islam,

the latter which is currently punishable by death. The Intergroup also asks the EEAS to engage with Sudan with regards to the country's upcoming constitutional changes.



We have a dream

We have a dream: freedom of religion all around the globe

Three score minus 2 years ago 12 ministers declared in Rome to strengthen peace and freedom in Europe. Twenty three years ago 12 heads of states declared in Maastricht that they would also promote these values in the entire world. Peace and freedom for all mankind, within and outside Europe. Peace and freedom, key words in every religion and non-religion.

Where are we now with peace and freedom in our world? Ask the students in Garissa about peace and freedom. Ask the refugees in Yarmouk about peace and freedom. On the beaches of Sirte you may still find blood of the beheaded copts. Look around near the churches in Lahore: stones with scattered shrapnel witness the 15th of March events. In that very same city 5 years earlier lives of many Ahmadi's were taken by extremists. Boko Haram, AL-Qaeda, ISIS, AL-Shabaab, Jemaah Islamiyah, Jundallah and Abu Sayyaf offer you peace and freedom to their instructions, or death.

Peace and freedom? We do not need an EU monitoring system to show us, they don't exist. Everyday newspapers and websites tell us that peace and freedom are for dreamers. Yet, we dream about them. We keep dreaming about them. We will dream about them. We force ourselves to dream about peace and freedom. This dream is the driving force for our work to promote freedom of religion or belief and religious tolerance. When will we stop dreaming?

Our dreams have become reality when the refugee-camps in north Syria, Lebanon and Jordan can be closed and when Yezidi's, Christians and Alawites and many other religious minorities are again fully respected citizens of their countries. When atheists in Egypt can freely express their beliefs and do not have to fear official persecution. When radical Hindu's acknowledge that forced conviction brings more victims than supporters. When ISIS-chiefs in Raqqa no longer lose their minds and offer excuses for beheading others. We will be able to stop our activities in the EP for promoting peace and freedom of religion or belief in Iran, when the religious leaders of that country offer Christians endless space, instead of the usual 3 square meters prison cell they now "offer" to people like Saeed Abedini. When the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are abolished. When president el-Bashir in Sudan no longer accepts stoning as a way to correct offences of honour, reputation and public morality. We will stop with our work when the North Korean's Institute for National Unification is respecting diversity all around the country. And the many labour camps are rebuilt into places of worship and religious tolerance. When UN special rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt visits Kazakhstan to praise in public its government about the continuous religious tolerance he has encountered. When USCIRF decides no longer to publish any report again. When Open Doors are closed. When the Dalai Lama is warmly welcomed in Beijing and applauded in the National People's Congress for his continued efforts for cooperation and religious peace.

Until those days we keep on dreaming. And we are stimulated in our political work. Every day. To promote peace, freedom and religious tolerance all around the globe.

Peter van Dalen & Dennis de Jong

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a fundamental human right enshrined in international law. In recent years this right has increasingly come under attack. The EU has strengthened its commitment to protecting and promoting FoRB worldwide but more needs to be done. The European Parliament has played a key role in pressuring the European Commission and External Action Service to take action. In particular the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance has been leading efforts through amendments, press releases, parliamentary questions, letters and events.

This is the first report on FoRB written by the Intergroup and follows on from the report written last year by the European Parliament Working Group on FoRB. It includes chapters on different world regions as well as a thematic chapter on places of worship and religious symbols and sites. The report also has country specific and institutional recommendations. It is a unique and practical tool for policymakers and other stakeholders engaged in FoRB and EU foreign affairs.

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



European Parliament Intergroup on

FoRB & RT

Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance

Contacting the Intergroup on FoRB & RT:
Co-Presidents are MEPs Cornelis (Dennis) de Jong (SP, Netherlands) and
Peter van Dalen (ECR, Netherlands)

You can contact the Intergroup through the Secretariat:

a.vaiya@religiousfreedom.eu

www.religiousfreedom.eu