



Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa

Summary Report

Executive Summary

This report highlights core insights from the MENAP Dialogue Series on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Stability, which brought together nearly 100 participants from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The dialogues revealed that challenges to FoRB stem not only from discriminatory laws or policies but also from deeper political, social, and security dynamics. Participants emphasized both the risks of exclusion and the region's long history of coexistence.

Overall, the findings show that FoRB is integral to stability, trust, and long-term peace. Where FoRB is restricted, fragmentation, displacement, and mistrust increase. Where FoRB is protected, social cohesion grows and states gain legitimacy.

Purpose of the Report

This report summarizes key insights from the MENAP Dialogue Series, which gathered participants from over 14 Arabic-speaking countries to explore how FoRB influences coexistence, security, governance, and peacebuilding. Conducted entirely in Arabic, the dialogues provided a rare safe space to discuss one of the region's most sensitive and least understood issues.

Methodology

The findings draw on seven online sessions held from May to September 2025, supplemented by side discussions and individual consultations. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, all contributions were anonymized. The themes presented here represent recurring patterns observed across diverse national and social contexts.

Key Findings

1. Structural and Legal Exclusion: Legal frameworks, including constitutions, civil registries, and personal status laws, often embed inequality. Some communities remain legally invisible, unable to register marriages, acquire documentation, or build places of worship. Others are recognized only conditionally and denied autonomy. Minority women experience “double discrimination” due to unequal family laws. Even where constitutions guarantee equality, inconsistent implementation leaves communities unprotected and insecure.

2. Politicization of Religion: Religion is frequently instrumentalized to consolidate political power, marginalize dissent, or mobilize sectarian identity. Citizenship becomes linked to loyalty rather than rights.

3. Coexistence Sustained by Fear, Not Trust: Many participants described a form of “controlled coexistence” that appears stable but is maintained through fear rather than genuine inclusion. When authoritarian systems collapse, as in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, suppressed grievances erupt violently. State institutions break down, militias replace governance, minorities flee, and religious sites are destroyed. Reconstruction alone cannot restore trust; dignity, safety, and rights are essential.

4. Civil Society Under Pressure: Civil society organizations are crucial defenders of FoRB but operate in environments marked by surveillance, legal restrictions, and security threats. Activists

risk harassment or arrest, while women activists face additional gender-based dangers. Short-term donor funding undermines sustainability. Nevertheless, civil society preserves heritage, documents violations, and supports survivors, often without sufficient long-term support.

5. Gendered Exclusion: Minority women suffer intersecting discrimination as both women and members of marginalized communities. They serve as cultural guardians, educators, mediators, and advocates for safe return, yet remain underrepresented in decision-making. Participants stressed that long-term programs must actively prioritize women’s leadership in addressing FoRB challenges.

6. Misperceptions of FoRB: FoRB is widely misunderstood. Many view it as a minority-only issue, an external “Western agenda,” or a threat to religious identity. Some fear it encourages conversion or undermines tradition. Participants observed that when FoRB is explained in culturally grounded, locally relevant language, support increases, especially when linked to stability, safe return, heritage protection, and national unity.

7. Ambivalent Role of Religious Leaders: Religious leaders hold significant influence. Some promote coexistence, mediate conflicts, and support displaced families. Others reinforce division or align with political and armed actors. Effective FoRB strategies must empower positive leadership and challenge harmful rhetoric.

Exclusion in the MENA region is structural, not incidental. When FoRB is restricted, fragmentation and displacement increase. When FoRB is protected, trust grows and states gain legitimacy. FoRB is therefore a stabilizing force essential to long-term peace.

Country Case Studies

Although many countries face FoRB challenges, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen appeared most consistently in participant discussions because of their historical diversity and the severe impact of conflict and governance breakdown.

Across the region, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen illustrate how conflict, authoritarianism, and politicized identity have eroded long-standing religious diversity. In Iraq, decades of sectarian power-sharing, and ISIS’s violence displaced communities and undermined trust. Syria’s war transformed controlled pluralism into sectarian fragmentation, destroying sites and displacing minorities. Lebanon’s recognition of eighteen communities masks a confessional system that entrenches inequality and dependence on sectarian networks, worsened by economic collapse. Yemen’s once diverse religious landscape has been nearly erased by conflict, persecution, and state collapse. Together, these cases show how fragile pluralism becomes when rights are absent and protection fails.

Across cases, participants identified three shared regional lessons:

1. Exclusion fuels insecurity and displacement.
2. Coexistence without rights collapses when coercion weakens.
3. Reconstruction requires FoRB, not only infrastructure.

Recommendations

1. Governments

- Reform discriminatory laws and ensure equal recognition for all communities.
- Modernize personal status systems that disadvantage women and minorities.
- Protect religious sites and ensure equal access to services through non-sectarian mechanisms.
- Establish accountability for hate speech and incitement.
- Integrate FoRB into national security, peacebuilding, and development strategies.

2. Civil Society

- Adopt long-term, locally rooted strategies supported by multi-year funding.
- Strengthen women's and youth leadership.
- Expand dialogue, mediation, and digital engagement platforms.
- Document violations and build regional networks to counter the perception of FoRB as a foreign agenda.

3. Religious Leaders

- Promote inclusive interpretations rooted in regional traditions.
- Reject hate speech and divisive rhetoric.
- Engage in interfaith initiatives and support displaced communities.
- Ensure accountability mechanisms to prevent misuse of religious authority.

4. Media and Education

- Encourage FoRB-sensitive journalism.
- Integrate diversity and coexistence into school curricula.
- Use digital platforms to counter misinformation and amplify positive narratives.

5. International Partners

- Support locally led initiatives and provide long-term funding.
- Integrate FoRB into diplomacy, development, and humanitarian programming.
- Support legal reform, documentation efforts, and protection for at-risk communities.

Core Message and Way Forward

FoRB is both a human rights obligation and a strategic pathway to resilience and peace. When individuals and communities can live free from coercion, states gain legitimacy, displaced families can return safely, and coexistence becomes sustainable.

The MENAP Dialogue Series demonstrated a clear regional willingness to engage with FoRB when provided with culturally grounded, safe spaces for discussion. Building on this momentum requires sustained cooperation, inclusive public narratives, and long-term commitment from governments, religious leaders, civil society, and international partners.

Please visit this link for the full report:

https://www.menapplatform.org/files/ugd/b1b030_50273e0d4cfe44ecb1cdf894b6e56e2c.pdf

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