

Forum: Human Rights Council

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TOPIC 2: The issue of individuals' freedom of religion

 LibGuide

I. Introduction to the Topic

The freedom of religion is the right to practise any religion that one chooses without interference. To understand the theme “How do we ensure sustainability through multilateral cooperation”, it is important for the delegates to collaborate in making constructive resolutions to address the issue of individuals' freedom of religion. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) both protect this fundamental right. Although such treaties exist, numerous countries continue to restrict religious freedom.

More than 80 countries, meaning 40% of countries worldwide, favor a specific religion or have official state religions. 43 countries have official state religions, many of which are found in the Middle East and North Africa. Official state religions and the country's preference towards a specific religion can limit the religious freedom of civilians. Furthermore, 10 countries have a hostile relationship towards religion, including Cuba and Vietnam. These countries either openly oppose religion in general or exercise a great deal of control over religious organisations in their nations.

Since 2007, there has been an increase in the number of countries that have government restrictions on religion, and in the number of social hostilities, such as violence and harassment, involving religion. Government restrictions include laws and policies that require religious groups to register in order to operate and funding for religious education. For example, countries such as China and Eritrea only recognize a specific set of religious groups and deny registration to all others. Social hostilities include hostilities related to religious norms and harassment by individuals and social groups. Countries with high social hostilities related to religious norms include Germany, India, France, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

II. Definition of Key Terms & Concepts

Freedom of religion: The idea of the right of an individual or group to freely express their religion or belief through teaching, practice, worship, and observance, in public or private.

Official state religion: A state that has officially endorsed a certain religion or faith. Even though it is not a secular state, a state with an official religion is not always a theocracy (i.e. not always a government by divine guidance).

Blasphemy: An insult that conveys disdain, scorn, or a lack of respect for a god, a sacred object, or something regarded as inviolable. In many countries, blasphemy is not tolerated and is often punished severely. This is particularly relevant in some Muslim countries where blasphemy is punishable by death.

Religious violence: Violence that is inspired by or in response to a target's or an attacker's religious doctrines, texts, or precepts. This is relevant as religious violence is increasing globally.

III. Key Stakeholders

European Union (EU): The European Union is becoming increasingly involved in this issue as social hostilities and government restrictions increase among the countries under its membership. For example, France banned wearing face-covering headgear and full-body costumes in public places, including niqābs and burqas. Furthermore, Jews face restrictions and/or hostilities in many of the countries. Most countries do not have religious diversity.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): The OHCHR aims to promote and protect human rights guaranteed internationally by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). They work to ensure the respect of freedom of religion through two initiatives: the Rabat Plan of Action and the “Faith for Rights” framework. The Rabat Plan of Action’s objective is to gain a better understanding of policies regarding the concept of incitement to religious hatred. The “Faith for Rights” framework builds on the Rabat Plan of Action and aims to foster the development of peaceful societies, where diversity is fully respected and celebrated.

Middle East and North Africa (MENA): MENA is a group of countries situated in the Middle East and North Africa. The majority of these countries have official state religions, mostly Islam as their state religion. This connects to the social hostilities that people face in the region, such as the harassment of women for not wearing secular clothing. Furthermore, other religious groups are treated harshly whereas the official state religion is given benefits. For example, in Iran, public religious expression, persuasion or conversion by non-Muslim groups is punishable by death.

IV. Key Issues including Background Information

Blasphemy and Apostasy laws: 71 out of 195 countries have blasphemy laws. Penalties for violating blasphemy laws in these countries can range from fines to imprisonment and death. For example, in Indonesia, a Christian woman with paranoid schizophrenia was tried for committing blasphemy against Islam for bringing a dog into a mosque. These laws are most commonly found in the Middle East and North Africa, where 90% of the 20 countries had such laws. Furthermore, 22 countries had laws against apostasy, which is the act of abandoning faith.

Some countries only recognize specific religions: This means that countries that are not recognized by the government face different treatment. For example, in Eritrea, the government recognizes only four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. All other religious groups since 2002 have not been registered or allowed to perform religious activities and services. Another example is that Uzbekistan criminalises activities by unregistered religious groups because they are “illegal.” In addition, they designate certain Islamic groups to be extremist and therefore prohibited.

Women: As of 2018, women in 56 countries experienced social hostilities due to clothing that was believed to be against religious or secular dress norms. Social harassment can take the form of verbal abuse, physical assault, or murders that are partially motivated by the target's religious identity. Furthermore, women in 61 countries faced government restrictions on dress such as regulations on their head coverings. In many regions of the world with the exception of the Middle East and North Africa, Muslim women faced discrimination, physical violence, and other forms of abuse for wearing head coverings.

V. Timeline of Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of event
1948	The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
1976	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) was effective. It is a treaty that pledges nations to respect the civil and political rights of

individuals, including the freedom of religion.

- 1981 The UN General Assembly adopted resolution 36/55, by which it proclaimed the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.
- 2001 The September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States led to increased scrutiny of religious practices, particularly Islam, and concerns about religious extremism.
- 2004 The French government enacts a law banning conspicuous religious symbols, including headscarves, in public schools, sparking debates about religious freedom and secularism.
- 2014 ISIS conducted mass violence and genocide against the Yezidis, a minor religious group, near Mount Shingal. They also targeted Assyrian Christians, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Shabak Muslims, Turkmen and Kaka'i.

VI. Possible Challenges & Solutions

Blasphemy and Apostasy laws: Since 71 of 195 countries have blasphemy laws and 22 countries have apostasy laws, many of which have severe penalties, it will be hard to fully establish religious freedom among the United Nations' sovereign states. Countries without such laws might want to consider establishing a framework that protects individuals who express blasphemy or apostasy. Countries that do have these laws can consider minimizing the punishments and removing the possibility of prison or death sentences for those who are found guilty, or perhaps even create a long-term plan that works towards abolishing blasphemy and/or apostasy laws.

Some countries only recognize specific religions: This is an issue that restricts the universal right of religious freedom. It could lead to people practicing religion in private, and thus lead to an increase in prisoners of conscience. Countries can consider requiring all religious groups to register in order to operate, regardless the religion. Delegates may want to address the government's favoritism towards specific religions. Furthermore, delegates could create a framework that protects individuals and religious groups from harassment from the government and society.

Women: Women in many countries of the world are affected by social hostilities and dress regulations. Dress regulations are especially of concern in countries of MENA, where women are expected to wear religious clothing. On the other hand, women wearing head coverings in European countries face discrimination. Delegates may want to address this issue and create services and campaigns to help protect women from violence instigated by religion. Resolutions should work towards allowing women to have the choice of wearing religious clothing without being discriminated against and punishing those who harass women for religious reasons.

VII. Recommendations for Resolution Writing including Research

In the resolution writing and research, please take full advantage of this chair report and the libguide sources as they provide lots of information regarding the topic. It is crucial that you fully understand your country's stance on religion as it will strengthen the delegates' quality of argument in the debate. Thus, delegates are advised to first conduct research on religion in their assigned country before writing their resolutions. For example, delegates can research the religious diversity within the country and issues related to religion such as religious violence. Delegates should also research their country's laws on religion as many countries require religious groups to register in order to operate and/or favour a specific religion. Delegates with official state religions should conduct some research as it may be useful when drafting resolutions with other countries. Delegates' perspectives must be free from any bias or personal opinions regarding the issue.

Although not necessary, it will be helpful to research other countries' stances beforehand in order to form alliances during draft resolutions and during the debate. Delegates should form alliances with countries that have similar views on religion and/or the same official state/preferred religion.

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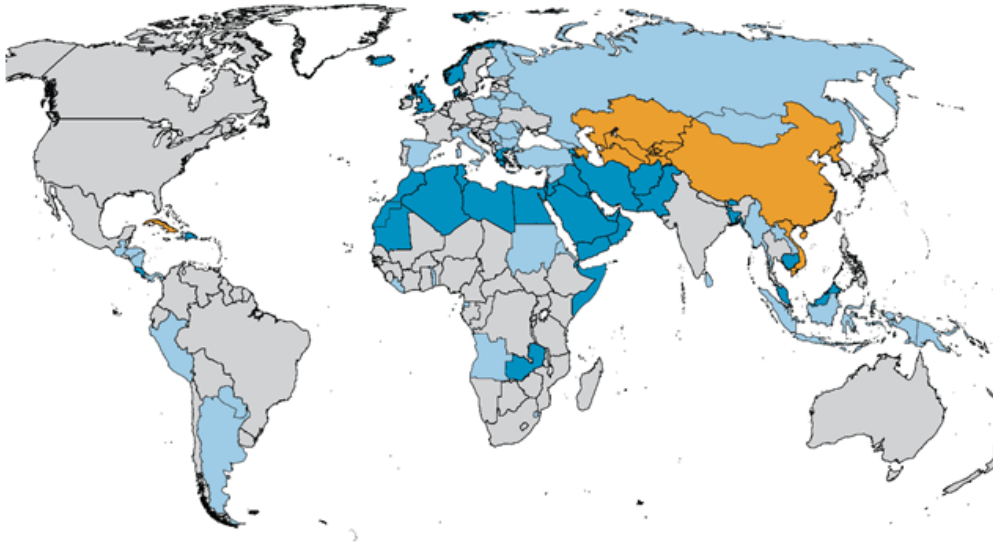
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IX: Additional Resources

Four-in-ten countries have official state religions or preferred religions

Among the 199 countries analyzed, a breakdown of the state's relationship with religion

Official state religion	Preferred/favored religion	No official or preferred religion	Hostile to religious institutions
43 countries (22%)	40 (20%)	106 (53%)	10 (5%)



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. See Methodology for details.
 "Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially"

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A colour-coded map of countries around the world on their relationship with religion (Pew Research Center)



Activists in Karachi carry signs against Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman who was released after spending eight years on death row for blasphemy in November 2018 (Arab News)