



The European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) is a network composed of religious and non-religious associations.

Operating at an EU level, it aims to advance Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for everybody.

## What is Freedom of Religion or Belief?

Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that:

*“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.”*

The right to Freedom of Religion or Belief is enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which has been ratified by more than 160 countries worldwide. Nonetheless, millions of people continue to be victims of intolerance and discrimination because of their religion or belief.

## State Discrimination in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the authorities require that all religious bodies be registered with the state and subjected to a strict system of control. Members of “non-recognised” religious organisations such as the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), ethnic Christians in the Northern and Central highlands, Hoa Hao and Khmer Krom Buddhists suffer harassment, threats, police surveillance, house arrests or detention.



A Buddhist monk attacked by plain-clothed security agents in Vietnam.



*“Promoting freedom of religion or belief is vital for building a holistic system of human rights protection, based on due respect for the inherent dignity of all members of the human family.”*

(Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief)

## Persecution in Iran

In Iran, seven leaders of the Bahá’í Community have been imprisoned since spring 2008. Arbitrary arrests and raids, confiscation of property, incitement to hatred, denial of access to education and systematic marginalisation of the Bahá’í community as well as Christians and other religious minority groups continue to take place.

## Rising Intolerance in Indonesia

The Pew Research Centre recently ranked the country as amongst the five countries with the highest level of religious restrictions worldwide, taking into account indices for government restrictions and social hostility. The most often targeted are Christians and Muslim minority groups such as the Ahmadiyya.

According to the first principle of *Pancasila*, every national is supposed to have a belief “in one supreme God”; therefore, atheism is technically outlawed. An atheist blogger, Alexander Aan, was sentenced in June 2012 to two and a half years in prison for setting up a Facebook page for atheists in Indonesia. Thanks to international pressure, he was released in January 2014.

## Repression in Eritrea

Eritrea is one of the most repressive and secretive countries in the world, where religious freedom and other fundamental rights are consistently disregarded. In a move to control religious communities, the government banned all religious activity not affiliated to Sunni Islam and the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox denominations in 2002.

Arrests of Christians from both authorised and prohibited groups have continued with varying waves of intensity ever since. At least 100 Christians were arrested in 2013, whilst an unknown number of Muslims have “disappeared” or been extrajudicially executed.



A non-authorized Seventh Day Adventist Church in Eritrea.

## Freedom of Religion or Belief in Europe

It is a popular misconception that Europe is free of FoRB related violations as there are many European and international instruments and mechanisms granting this right. Indeed, European countries offer greater levels of freedom of religion and belief than most non-European countries. However, Europe is not exempt. In Northern Cyprus, for example, access to holy places is still regularly denied to Christians. Recent FoRB violations across Europe have been predominantly islamophobic and antisemitic in nature.



According to the Flash Eurobarometer from November 2012, 39% of Europeans believe discrimination on the grounds of religion or beliefs is widespread. Amongst religious minorities, the number is even higher; across Europe, 54% have the impression that discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief is widespread in their respective countries.

### Why Freedom of Religion or Belief matters

Respect for Freedom of Religion or Belief is not only a moral obligation, it also is a necessary condition for social wellbeing, stability, tolerance and pluralism in society.

1. According to international law each individual has the right to live according to their conscience and to freely hold and change religious and non-religious beliefs; this is the cornerstone of a modern democracy. Where individuals cannot make decisions on the basis of their fundamental convictions, democracy is endangered.
2. FoRB is deeply interlinked with other fundamental human rights. The state of FoRB in any country is, therefore, an important litmus test of pluralism and the space available for critical dialogue.
3. Many conflicts are rooted in, or exacerbated by, religious differences. Policy-makers are increasingly recognising that strategies aimed at conflict prevention, mediation and peace-building must integrate the promotion of FoRB if they are to succeed.



*"We subscribe to the principle of inter-relatedness and indivisibility of human rights, but we also recognise that respect for freedom of religion or belief often serves as the ultimate litmus test for respect for other human rights, precisely because there are so many different manifestations of this freedom that are closely linked to other human rights and fundamental freedoms."*

(Dennis de Jong, MEP and co-president of the EP Working Group on FoRB)



*"Freedom of Religion or Belief is one of the toughest challenges [on Europe's human rights agenda], and I am extremely thankful that people like you are supporting the EU in finding the proper way of promoting it."*  
(Stavros Lambrinidis, EU Special Representative for Human Rights)

### What is happening at the EU?

As European societies face new challenges, such as cultural and religious diversity, discrimination and the relationship between secularism and freedom of religion or belief, it is vital that the EU addresses religious intolerance and discrimination in a timely and relevant manner, both in its internal and external policies.

Therefore, EPRID welcomes the adoption of the EU guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief in June 2013, which represents a significant step forward in institutionalising the EU's recognition of the crucial importance of this right. The appointment of Ján Figel' as Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU in 2016 is also a very positive development.

The guidelines need to be followed up by practical implementation and monitoring processes. EPRID particularly commends the training on FoRB for EU officials. EPRID and its members, many of whom have expertise in FoRB education and training, are involved in supporting the EU in the implementation process.

### Contact EPRID

All emails can be addressed to [info@eprid.eu](mailto:info@eprid.eu) - or visit the EPRID website at [www.eprid.eu](http://www.eprid.eu)

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