Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa

Field-based Insights and Recommendations from the MENA Platform for Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding

Middle East and North Africa Platform for Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding (MENAP)
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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a regional dialogue process on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa, carried out between May and October 2025 by the Middle East and North Africa Platform for Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding (MENAP). The initiative sought to create a safe space for open, Arabic-language discussion on an issue that is often misrepresented as a foreign demand or a sensitive topic reserved for closed circles. By gathering diverse voices across the region, civil society leaders, religious actors, academics, youth, women's groups, legal experts, and diaspora representatives, the platform aimed to understand how FoRB is experienced in daily life and to explore its role in stability, citizenship, and coexistence in the MENA region.

Throughout seven online dialogue sessions and a series of side-group meetings and individual consultations, participants consistently stressed that the absence of FoRB is not a theoretical concern but a practical cause of insecurity. Communities that lack legal recognition face obstacles in accessing documentation, reclaiming property, registering marriages, receiving public services, or seeking justice when harmed. Without equal citizenship, individuals become dependent on sectarian networks or armed actors for protection. When faith is politicized or weaponized, trust between communities collapses and the state loses legitimacy. The discussions made clear that legal inequality and religious discrimination are not isolated incidents but structural features that shape everyday life.

Despite the diversity of participants and national contexts, similar patterns emerged across the region. Many described how coexistence had long been preserved not through equality but through fear or silence. Such arrangements appear stable during periods of strong central authority, but rapidly disintegrate when political control weakens. This dynamic was especially visible in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, countries repeatedly referenced by participants due to their religious diversity and the severe consequences of conflict, displacement, and sectarian fragmentation. These cases demonstrate that while infrastructure can be rebuilt, trust cannot return without legal guarantees and a sense of dignity.

At the same time, the dialogues highlighted a foundation of hope. Across multiple countries, participants pointed to local traditions, shared religious heritage, and personal experience as evidence that coexistence is part of the region's identity. Many emphasized that FoRB is not a foreign idea, but a principle rooted in regional history, culture, and theology. Others stressed that civil society, particularly women and youth, continues to defend pluralism, even in contexts of repression, displacement, or crisis. Religious leaders also play a decisive role, some promote tolerance and unity, while others contribute to division. Their engagement is therefore essential for change.

From Iraq's displaced Yazidis and Christians, to Lebanon's paralyzed confessional system, to Syria and Yemen's devastated pluralism, the region provides painful evidence that the absence of FoRB has human, political, and economic consequences. Reconstruction in these contexts will fail if

citizens cannot trust that their identity, belief, and community will be safe. Physical recovery without rights will only rebuild the foundations of the next conflict.

The report concludes that FoRB is both a human right and a peacebuilding strategy. Upholding FoRB strengthens the rule of law, protects minorities, encourages the safe return of displaced families, and rebuilds trust between citizens and the state. Its absence fuels instability, suspicion, and cycles of violence. For governments, civil society, religious institutions, and international partners, FoRB offers a practical pathway to coexistence rooted in equal citizenship rather than sectarian entitlement. Protecting it is not only a matter of belief; it is a prerequisite for sustainable peace.

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Background & Objectives

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) remains one of the least understood and most sensitive issues across the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa. For the purposes of this report, the term 'MENA' refers specifically to these Arabic-speaking states. While some definitions include Iran, Turkey, and Israel, the MENAP dialogue series focused on contexts where Arabic is the primary shared language among participants and where discussions could be held safely and openly. This linguistic and cultural focus shaped the scope of the project rather than implying any absence of FoRB challenges in non-Arab states. Although the region has long been home to rich religious diversity, public discussion on FoRB is often constrained by political sensitivities, limited civic space, and fears that the concept represents an external agenda. As a result, FoRB is seldom framed as a shared regional concern or as a practical foundation for peacebuilding, equal citizenship, and national stability, leaving misconceptions to circulate and reducing opportunities for constructive dialogue.

The Middle East and North Africa Platform (MENAP) for Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding (MENAP) launched this initiative to address that gap. The aim was not to impose definitions or external frameworks, but to enable a space where communities could speak in their own language, with their own references, and on their own terms. Conducting the dialogues in Arabic was a deliberate choice, designed to remove linguistic barriers and make the subject accessible to participants who are rarely included in international conversations about FoRB.

The purpose of the dialogue process was threefold:

First, it sought to understand how religious freedom, or the lack of it, is experienced in daily life across different countries. Rather than focusing solely on legal documents or high-level political discourse, the project prioritized lived experience, access to basic rights, security, documentation, justice, and services.

Second, the initiative aimed to identify the relationship between FoRB and broader challenges of peacebuilding. Participants were invited to discuss how discrimination, exclusion, and sectarian competition contribute to conflict, displacement, and the breakdown of trust.

Third, the dialogues set out to identify practical and locally grounded solutions. Throughout the sessions, participants shared examples of coexistence, community mediation, heritage protection, and interfaith cooperation that persist despite fragility and displacement.

In designing the project, MENAP also recognized that the region contains diverse political environments. from open civic space to extreme restrictions. The dialogue method allowed individuals from these different contexts to engage safely, reflect collectively, and learn from one another. Importantly, the initiative did not restrict participation to minority communities alone. Many participants came from majority backgrounds, reinforcing that FoRB is not only a minority issue; it is a question of citizenship and the foundations of national identity.

The overall objective of this report is to present the insights and lessons drawn from the dialogue process and to translate them into clear recommendations for governments, civil society, religious institutions, media, and international partners. By grounding the analysis in community voices and regional realities, the report seeks to demonstrate that FoRB is not a theoretical aspiration, but an achievable and necessary component of durable peace in the region.

Methodology

This report is based on a structured, donor-supported regional dialogue process carried out between May and October 2025. The methodology prioritized participatory engagement, local ownership, and evidence drawn directly from lived experience, rather than abstract theory.

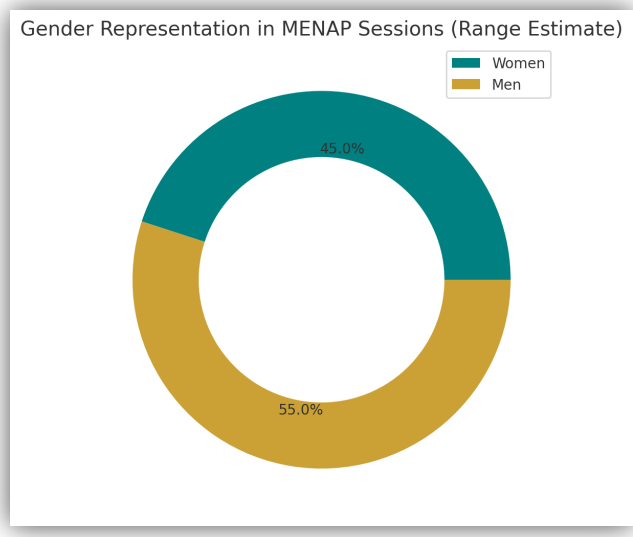
Dialogue Process

MENAP delivered seven uninterrupted online sessions between May and September 2025, alongside side-group meetings and individual consultations that continued through October. All sessions were conducted in Arabic, removing linguistic barriers that often prevent communities in the region from participating meaningfully in FoRB discussions. In total, around 100 participants took part in the programme, with each session gathering between 25 and 50 individuals. Participants represented more than 14 countries across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and North America. The Arab countries represented included Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Mauritania, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Sudan. In addition, a number of practitioners, researchers, and advocates from Europe and North America joined the sessions.

Participants included:

- Civil society leaders
- legal professionals
- Religious figures
- Youth activists
- Academics and researchers
- Diaspora and international FoRB experts

Women represented **45–55%** of participants, both as speakers and active discussants, ensuring strong gender inclusion in analysis and knowledge production.



Data and Thematic Analysis

All sessions were moderated, documented, and later analyzed to extract shared themes and patterns. Despite differing political contexts, participants consistently identified:

- Legal discrimination and unequal citizenship
- Politicized religion and sect-based governance
- Fragile coexistence enforced by fear rather than trust
- Civil society resilience under pressure
- Gendered barriers and the "double marginalization" of minority women
- Misinformation and misconceptions surrounding FoRB
- The role of religious leaders in both conflict and reconciliation

These themes formed the analytical foundation of the report.

Ethical and Protective Measures

Given the sensitivity surrounding FoRB in the region, we do not name any participants in this report. Public attribution could place individuals or their communities at personal, legal, or social risk. For this reason, all contributions are anonymized, and quotations are presented without reference to names or specific locations. The report therefore focuses on thematic patterns drawn from the dialogue sessions rather than identifying individual speakers. All insights, however, are grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives shared by participants throughout the process.

Why This Method Is Effective

Because FoRB is sensitive and often censored, traditional surveys or public consultations would not capture lived experience. Using Arabic-language dialogue, safe spaces, and regional actors allowed people to speak freely about exclusion, displacement, and possibilities for reform. The result is a body of knowledge rooted in local reality, not imposed from external frameworks.

Finally, although the dialogues included participants from 14 countries, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen were referenced most frequently in the discussions. Their experiences were raised repeatedly because they combine deep religious diversity with acute fragility, conflict, and displacement. Their prominence in this report therefore reflects the issues highlighted by participants themselves rather than any judgement about the severity of FoRB conditions elsewhere in the region. Significant challenges also exist in other MENA contexts, some of which face equally serious or even more restrictive environments. Their more limited appearance in the dialogues is largely due to political sensitivities, differing levels of civic space, or the ability of participants to speak openly, rather than an indication that FoRB concerns are less pressing in those settings.

4. Key Findings

The MENAP dialogues revealed that FoRB in the MENA region is shaped not only by formal laws or government policies, but by deeper structural, political, and societal dynamics. These dynamics differ by country, yet they follow remarkably consistent regional patterns. What emerges is not a series of isolated violations, but a system of exclusion that is sustained through law, governance, political culture, social narratives, and insecurity.

The findings below capture the seven most significant drivers of exclusion identified across the region.

A Sudanese activist highlighted that "participating in this series of sessions revealed indicators and themes that we had not previously considered. It reinforced that protecting religious freedoms is central to sustaining peace and social stability."

4.1 Structural and Legal Exclusion

One of the most common, and least visible, foundations of religious exclusion in MENA is the legal architecture of the state itself. Many constitutions, personal status codes, civil registries, and administrative systems legally enshrine inequality. Even where laws appear neutral, implementation often privileges dominant groups.

Legal invisibility

In several countries, entire communities are not recognized by the state. Without legal recognition, they cannot register marriages, inherit property, open places of worship, or access civil

documentation. Legal invisibility becomes a form of social erasure, communities exist culturally and historically, but the state treats them as if they do not exist.

Conditional recognition

In other states, communities are recognized only under conditions that restrict autonomy or religious practice. Their places of worship require special permission, religious education is limited, or conversion laws criminalize changing one's faith. Symbolic terms like "tolerance" or "protection" are used, but without equal citizenship.

Personal status laws

Family law is one of the clearest indicators of inequality. In some countries, personal status codes allow different rights based on religion, particularly around marriage, custody, divorce, and inheritance. Interfaith marriage is restricted or banned in several contexts. Minority women face double discrimination when the dominant group's religious law is imposed on them.

The implementation gap

Even when constitutions guarantee equality, local officials, courts, police, and security actors may interpret the law differently, or refuse to enforce it. The state speaks the language of protection, while communities experience bureaucratic discrimination. This gap undermines trust, citizens hear equality in theory, but exclusion in practice.

As dialogue participants repeatedly stated, legal exclusion does not only create inequality. It produces insecurity. A community without legal recognition or equal rights cannot rely on the state for protection. This insecurity fuels migration, displacement, and the refusal of displaced families to return home.

4.2 Politicization of Religion

Across the region, religion is frequently used as an instrument of political legitimacy. Governments, ruling elites, and armed groups invoke religious identity to maintain power, mobilize supporters, marginalize opponents, or suppress dissent. This instrumentalization does not strengthen religion, it weaponizes it.

One Egyptian female activist observed that *"there is a clear need for a permanent digital platform to sustain and deepen interreligious dialogue, ensuring that these conversations continue beyond individual events."*

Regimes and religious legitimacy

Authoritarian systems often present themselves as protectors of religion or national identity. Political opposition is framed as moral corruption, disloyalty, or foreign influence. In return, religious institutions receive protection or private benefits, creating a system of mutual dependence.

The distrust it produces

When religion becomes a political tool, FoRB is denied to those outside the dominant group or those accused of questioning state authority. Citizens learn that loyalty, not rights, determines access to security. Minority communities navigate daily life based on political alignment, not citizenship.

Political manipulation of sectarian identity

In conflict-affected countries, sectarian narratives are used to justify armed mobilization. Communities that once lived side-by-side now view each other through a lens of threat and suspicion. The state erodes, and identity war replaces civic belonging.

Participants emphasized a painful reality, the more the state claims to "protect religion," the less communities trust its intentions. When power, not faith, shapes religious policy, both democracy and religion suffer.

4.3 Fragile Coexistence Under Coercion

For decades, many MENA societies appeared outwardly stable. Diversity existed, but it was monitored, not embraced. Dialogue participants described this as "surface coexistence", a model where communities lived together not because of trust, but because speaking out was dangerous.

The illusion of stability

Authoritarian systems suppressed overt sectarian expression and punished open discrimination. This created an appearance of unity, but no mechanisms for addressing grievances, reforming law, or building trust.

When coercion collapses

In Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, when authoritarian control weakened, suppressed fears and anger resurfaced violently. Communities retreated into sectarian protection; militias replaced national institutions; minority groups fled or were displaced.

The dialogues showed a consistent truth, coexistence without rights is temporary**.** Once fear no longer enforces silence, fragmentation accelerates.

The cost of rebuilding

Reconstructing trust after collapse is far harder than protecting it before conflict. In Iraq and Syria, displaced communities repeatedly stated that physical reconstruction, schools, houses, infrastructure, is meaningless without guarantees of dignity, citizenship, and safety. Without FoRB, returns remain symbolic or short-lived.

4.4 Civil Society Constraints

"From our experience as civil society organizations, regional networking is essential to strengthen organizational capacity and design programs that address the shift from diversity as enrichment to diversity as conflict. Youth from different religious traditions should be central in leading these initiatives."

In many states, civil society is the primary defender of FoRB at the local level. NGOs document violations, run interfaith programs, protect cultural heritage, and support displaced communities. Yet they operate under three major constraints:

1. Restrictive legal environments: Some governments allow registration only for organizations aligned with official priorities. Others restrict foreign funding, monitor activities, or shut down groups perceived as political. In such contexts, working on FoRB is not only difficult, it is dangerous.

2. Insecurity and harassment: In conflict zones, civil society faces threats from militias, extremist groups, or local authorities. Activists documenting violations risk detention, violence, or exile. Women leaders face gendered threats and public smear campaigns.

3. Short-term donor funding: International support often arrives in small, fragmented grants focused on rapid outputs rather than long-term change. When funding ends, projects collapse, relationships dissolve, and progress disappears. Activists described this as "*living from project to project,"* never able to build institutions or strategy.

Despite these obstacles, civil society continues to protect fragile spaces of coexistence, restoring shrines, holding dialogue circles, and supporting survivors. Participants stressed that civil society does not lack creativity or commitment, it lacks protection and sustainability.

4.5 Gendered Exclusion

Women from minority communities described a double burden, discriminated against as women within patriarchal norms, and discriminated against as members of marginal communities.

"Long-term, community-based programmes are needed across both cities and rural areas. Women must be included as leaders, especially when addressing the challenges facing religious freedoms and their impact on women," explained one Syrian female participant.

The invisibility of minority women

Policies often frame women's rights as universal, but minority women emphasized that they are excluded from both national women's movements and mainstream minority rights advocacy. They occupy the margins of the margins.

Yet they are leaders

Across the region, minority women have assumed roles as:

- cultural heritage protectors
- interfaith mediators
- peace educators
- humanitarian coordinators
- advocates for return and reconciliation

In Iraq's Nineveh Plains, Lebanon's civil society spaces, and Syrian exile communities, women have kept interfaith dialogue alive when institutions collapsed. Their leadership demonstrates that FoRB is not simply about legal protection; it concerns dignity, agency, and daily safety.

Participants warned that FoRB strategies which ignore gender will reproduce exclusion instead of ending it. Protecting rights must include empowering women to shape laws, policies, and peace processes.

4.6 Misperceptions of FoRB

Perhaps the most persistent barrier is conceptual. Across dialogues, FoRB suffers from three recurring misperceptions:

1. FoRB is a minority demand: Majority communities often fear that protecting minorities means diminishing their own rights. In reality, FoRB protects everyone, majority and minority alike, by preventing coercion, politicized religion, and state manipulation.

2. FoRB is a Western or external agenda: Regimes and media sometimes frame FoRB as foreign intervention. Civil society actors are labelled "agents" or "importers of foreign culture." Yet historical memory contradicts this, coexistence is deeply rooted in the region's own traditions.

3. FoRB threatens religion: Some religious leaders fear FoRB encourages conversion, atheism, or moral decline. However, FoRB protects religion by ensuring that belief is voluntary, not imposed.

Shifting perceptions

Resistance decreased dramatically when FoRB was framed as:

- a tool for stability
- a condition for safe return of displaced communities
- a way to protect cultural heritage
- a pillar of national unity

Dialogue participants concluded that FoRB does not need new arguments, only new language.

4.7 The Ambivalent Role of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders hold immense authority in MENA. In the absence of strong state institutions, communities often trust clerics more than political actors. This makes religious leadership both a crucial opportunity and a serious risk.

Constructive roles

When leaders promote coexistence, their influence is transformative:

- mediating local disputes
- encouraging return of displaced families
- condemning extremist narratives
- preserving shared sacred sites
- supporting women's participation

Many leaders expressed willingness to adopt FoRB principles, if the language used was culturally rooted and not perceived as foreign.

Destructive roles

However, leaders aligned with armed groups or political parties have used sermons and media platforms to:

- legitimize discrimination
- reinforce sectarian stereotypes
- justify violence or exclusion
- portray minorities as threats or traitors

In fragile states, where accountability mechanisms are weak, hate speech can spread unchecked.

Implication

Ignoring religious leadership in FoRB strategies is unrealistic. Success requires both empowering inclusive leaders and creating accountability mechanisms for those who incite division.

Summary of Findings

This project revealed that exclusion is not accidental, it is structural. It is produced through legal systems, political manipulation and social narratives. Yet communities also demonstrated resilience, dialogue capacity, and deep regional values of coexistence.

The conclusion of this section is clear:

- **Where FoRB is restricted, societies fragment**: displacement increases, mistrust deepens, and extremist actors gain space.
- **Where FoRB is protected, trust grows**: return becomes possible, civil society strengthens, and states gain legitimacy.

FoRB is therefore not merely a human rights concern, it is a stabilizing force and a foundation for long-term peace.

5. Country Case Studies

While challenges to FoRB vary across national contexts, the MENAP dialogues revealed a consistent set of regional patterns. Historical legacies, legal frameworks, politicized religion, and state fragility have shaped how communities experience rights, security, and coexistence. The following country case studies illustrate how these dynamics unfold in practice.

While the dialogue series included participants from over fifteen states, four contexts arose consistently across discussions; **Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen**. These countries combine two critical characteristics. First, some of the most historically diverse societies in the region, and second, some of the most disrupted and fragile environments due to conflict, displacement, and sectarian fragmentation. For these reasons, participants repeatedly used them as reference points, either as evidence of the cost of neglecting FoRB, or as examples of local resilience and coexistence under pressure. Their prominence in the report reflects the analysis provided by participants, not a selective editorial choice.

5.1 Iraq

Iraq represents both the richness of regional diversity and the risks of failing to protect it. For centuries, the country was home to Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans, Kaka'i, Turkmen, and multiple Muslim communities. This pluralism was a defining feature of Iraqi society. Yet instead of protecting diversity, successive governments treated it as a threat.

Historical Exclusion

Under the monarchy, minorities were tolerated but marginal in political life. The rise of Baʿathist rule deepened exclusion. Homes and farms were confiscated, place names were changed, and communities were pressured to register as Arab or Muslim. These policies claimed to enforce national unity but instead dismantled local coexistence.

Collapse and Fragmentation

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 ended authoritarian control but failed to produce inclusive governance. The *muhasasa* (sectarian power-sharing) system divided institutions along ethnic and sectarian lines. Ministries functioned as communal fiefdoms; security was fragmented; minorities became marginal actors within a fractured state. When ISIS emerged in 2014, this foundation of mistrust and exclusion enabled rapid collapse.

Extremist Violence

The Islamic State's campaign produced genocide against Yazidis, mass displacement of Christians, Kaka'i and Shabak, and the destruction of cultural and religious sites. Communities fled in numbers so large that Iraq's historical pluralism is now at risk of disappearing.

Challenges After ISIS

Despite territorial defeat of ISIS, many displaced families have not returned. They fear unresolved property disputes, unclear security control, and demographic pressure from dominant political actors. Reconstruction focuses on physical infrastructure, but without FoRB-based guarantees, return remains symbolic.

5.2 Syria

Syria was once perceived as a mosaic of pluralism; Alawites, Sunnis, Christians, Druze, and others lived within a complex but stable social arrangement. Yet this stability relied on authoritarian management, not equality.

Managed Coexistence

For decades, the Assad regimes promoted a narrative of religious harmony. Minority communities were granted limited protection in exchange for loyalty, while the Sunni majority was heavily surveilled. Public expressions of sectarian identity were discouraged, but discriminatory practices persisted beneath the surface.

Collapse After 2011

The 2011 uprising transformed hidden tension into open conflict. State repression turned protests into war; communities were forced into sectarian camps for survival. Churches were destroyed, mosques militarized, and sacred spaces became battlefields. ISIS targeted Christians and Yazidis; armed groups imposed coercive religious rule in some areas.

Displacement and Loss

The war destroyed religious diversity. Christian populations declined dramatically; Yazidi and other minorities were persecuted in areas controlled by extremists. Even where communities survived, trust did not.

Civil Society in Exile

Inside Syria, working on FoRB is dangerous due to pervasive surveillance, the involvement of multiple armed actors. Despite these risks, diaspora networks and faith-based organisations continue to document abuses, preserve cultural and religious heritage, and advocate for accountability. Their efforts demonstrate that FoRB activism can persist even when the state collapses and operating within the country becomes impossible.

Participants emphasized that rebuilding Syria will not only require physical reconstruction, but a reimagining of citizenship. Without FoRB, displaced communities will not return and pluralism will remain symbolic.

5.3 Lebanon

Lebanon is often considered a rare regional example of formal religious recognition. Eighteen sects are recognized by the state. On the surface, this appears to protect pluralism. In practice, it locks citizens into fixed identities.

Confessional Governance

Lebanon's power-sharing system assigns parliamentary seats, political offices, and senior positions according to sect. While designed to prevent domination by one group, it entrenched communal competition. Instead of equal citizenship, individuals are defined by religious affiliation at birth.

Civil War Legacy

The 1975–1990 civil war revealed the dangers of such a system. Communities turned against each other; militias replaced the state. The Taif Agreement ended the fighting, but preserved confessional quotas, freezing inequality into institutions.

Current Crisis

Lebanon's economic collapse has further weakened state legitimacy. Basic services, electricity, education, healthcare, often depend on sectarian networks rather than national institutions. Citizens increasingly rely on religious leaders for protection. Minorities within minorities, Syrian refugees, migrant workers, smaller sects, face even deeper discrimination.

Civil Society Response

Lebanon is also home to strong interfaith activism. Women and youth-led movements have challenged sectarianism and demanded citizenship-based rights. The 2019 protest movement united people across sects, signaling that identity-based politics is not the only model. Yet without structural reform, sect-based politics continues to define daily life.

Lebanon demonstrates that recognition without equality does not protect FoRB. Coexistence remains conditional, and social trust remains fragile.

5.4 Yemen

Yemen once hosted a small but vibrant religious diversity, including Sunni and Zaydi Shia communities, Christians, an ancient millennia-old Jewish presence, and a recognised Baha'i population. Today, much of this pluralism has been erased.

Before the War

Under centralized rule, minorities lived under legal and social constraints but maintained cultural presence. The Jewish community had already begun to emigrate due to rising insecurity and discrimination. The Baha'i community faced periodic harassment and criminalization of its leadership.

After State Collapse

With the outbreak of war and the fragmentation of authority after 2014, armed groups filled the power vacuum. The Houthi movement imposed rigid religious control over public life and targeted Baha'i leaders with arrests, forced exile, and propaganda. Extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS persecuted minorities and attacked religious sites.

Near-Total Erasure

Today, Yemen's Jewish community is virtually gone. The Baha'i community has mostly fled. Christians worship in secrecy. The conflict has turned religion into a weapon of exclusion, identity-based violence, and social control.

Civil Society at the Margins

Inside Yemen, FoRB advocacy is nearly impossible. However, diaspora activists document violations, campaign for the release of detainees, and advocate internationally for protection. Their work shows the importance of regional and global networks when national space is closed.

Yemen illustrates the extreme consequences of neglecting FoRB, once diversity is destroyed, it is almost impossible to restore. Reconstruction will require not only peace agreements, but legal guarantees, social trust, and protection for returning communities.

Common Threads Across Cases

Across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, dialogue participants identified three shared lessons:

1. **Exclusion produces insecurity.** When communities lack legal recognition and equal rights, they become vulnerable to displacement, coercion, and violence.
2. **Coexistence without rights is temporary.** Authoritarian "stability" collapses quickly once repression weakens.
3. **Reconstruction requires FoRB.** Without guarantees of dignity and citizenship, physical rebuilding will not lead to trust, return, or reconciliation.

Implications for Policy and Peacebuilding

These case studies show that FoRB is not peripheral to governance, it is central. States that protect pluralism are more resilient. States that suppress or manipulate identity eventually face instability. Displaced communities will not return without protection. Civil society cannot build peace without space to operate. Religious leaders cannot promote tolerance without accountability.

As many participants stated, "The region can survive economic crisis and political transition, but it cannot survive the death of trust." FoRB is therefore a strategic pathway to rebuilding that trust.

6. Analysis and Lessons Learned

The country cases and regional dialogue findings demonstrate that challenges to FoRB across the MENA are not accidental, isolated, or caused solely by individual prejudice. They are structural, historical, and continuously reproduced by political systems, legal frameworks, and social narratives. While each country operates under different political conditions, three overarching lessons emerge that have direct implications for peacebuilding, governance, and development.

Lesson 1: Coexistence Without Rights Is Fragile and Unsustainable

Many MENA societies maintained a façade of stability for decades. Diversity could be seen in neighbourhoods, religious festivals, and everyday interactions. Yet beneath the surface, communities lived under systems of coercive coexistence, where pluralism was tolerated only if it remained silent, invisible, and politically harmless.

This form of stability collapses swiftly once authoritarian control weakens. Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya demonstrate how quickly suppressed fears, grievances, and stereotypes are weaponized when political order breaks down. Communities retreat to sectarian protection, militias replace national institutions, and minorities flee.

The lesson is clear; coexistence enforced by repression does not build trust, equality, or social resilience. It delays conflict rather than resolving it. When protection depends on political loyalty instead of equal citizenship, fear, rather than dignity, defines belonging.

Lesson 2: Legal Recognition and Equal Citizenship Are Central to Security

One of the strongest findings from MENAP's dialogues is that insecurity is not only caused by armed conflict or extremist groups. It is produced long before violence begins, through legal invisibility, discriminatory personal status laws, and unequal access to health, education, and employment.

Participants emphasized that a community without legal recognition is a community without protection. Property cannot be reclaimed, crimes cannot be prosecuted, marriages cannot be registered, identity cannot be passed to children. In this context, displacement becomes a permanent condition rather than a temporary crisis.

The link between law and peacebuilding is therefore direct:

- Where citizens experience equal rights, they invest in rebuilding.
- Where rights are conditional, they migrate or remain displaced.

FoRB is not only a rights issue; it is an issue of national resilience.

Lesson 3: Politicized Religion Erodes State Legitimacy

Across multiple contexts, governments present themselves as guardians of religion in order to cement political authority. Yet this strategy weakens the state, rather than strengthening it. When citizens believe that rights are granted based on loyalty, not equal citizenship, trust collapses.

Dialogue participants repeatedly stressed that the instrumentalization of religion is a form of corruption. It allows identity to determine access to opportunity, security, and political representation. Over time, citizens disengage from the state and turn toward sectarian or militia-

based protection networks. The result is parallel sovereignties, fragmented national identity, and long-term instability.

The implication is crucial, protecting FoRB strengthens the state, because it signals that the rule of law, not sectarian affiliation, defines citizenship.

Lesson 4: Civil Society Is a Lifeline, But Cannot Replace the State

In nearly every country examined, civil society, not government, has been the main defender of FoRB. NGOs provide humanitarian assistance across sectarian lines, preserve cultural heritage, mediate community tensions, and protect vulnerable groups. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria's diaspora, women and youth-led organizations play an especially transformative role.

However, civil society is operating under conditions of fragility and risk:

- restrictive NGO laws
- surveillance and intimidation
- limited funding
- shrinking civic space
- threats from armed actors

Civil society keeps coexistence alive, but without enabling legal and political environments, it cannot transform local initiatives into national change. The lesson is that civil society's resilience must be met with political will, otherwise, its successes remain fragile, local, and temporary.

Lesson 5: The Language of FoRB Matters as Much as the Law

A major breakthrough in MENAP's dialogues emerged from reframing FoRB. When participants heard FoRB described as a Western demand or minority interest, resistance was high. When it was expressed in regional language, drawing on shared history, Qur'anic principles, cultural traditions, and national development goals, resistance decreased.

Participants emphasized:

- FoRB is compatible with faith, not hostile to it.
- FoRB protects majority and minority communities alike.
- FoRB strengthens national unity, rather than undermining it.

The lesson is strategic, legal reform is essential, but without linguistic and cultural reframing, reforms will lack legitimacy.

Lesson 6: Religious Leaders Must Be Engaged—Not Ignored

Religious leaders hold moral authority, institutional reach, and the trust of communities. In fragile contexts, they often provide services the state cannot. When they support coexistence, their influence is powerful. When they promote exclusion, the damage is equally profound.

FoRB strategies must therefore involve:

- training to prevent hate speech and incitement,
- interfaith dialogue platforms,
- accountability mechanisms for misuse of religious authority,
- partnerships between religious leaders and civil society.

Ignoring religious leaders leaves a vacuum easily filled by extremist actors. The lesson is not to romanticize or demonize them, but to integrate them responsibly into peacebuilding.

Lesson 7: FoRB Is a Foundation for Reconstruction and Return

Across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, displaced communities do not make decisions based on infrastructure alone. They return when they believe:

- their identity will be respected,
- their property will be protected,
- their children will not be discriminated against,
- their places of worship will not be attacked,
- they will not be forced to deny their beliefs.

FoRB is therefore a precondition for post-conflict recovery, not an afterthought. Without it, return rates remain low and reconciliation remains symbolic.

Conclusion of Lessons

Taken together, these lessons demonstrate that FoRB is deeply intertwined with governance, citizenship, and national cohesion. FoRB strengthens institutions, protects communities, and rebuilds trust. Its absence is not neutral, it is destabilizing.

For policymakers, donors, international partners, and civil society, the message is clear:

FoRB is not an abstract principle. It is a practical strategy to transform fragile coexistence into sustainable peace.

7. Recommendations

The MENAP dialogues and regional analysis demonstrate that FoRB is a foundation for national stability, human dignity, and long-term peace. However, FoRB cannot be protected by law alone; it requires political will, institutional reform, civil society resilience, and cultural transformation. The following recommendations translate community insights into practical, achievable actions for governments, civil society, religious leaders, media, and international partners.

7.1 Recommendations for Governments and Policymakers

1. Reform Legal and Constitutional Frameworks

States should recognize religious and belief communities equally, ensuring access to civil documentation, personal status rights, and protection under the law. Legal invisibility must end. Constitutional language guaranteeing equality must be supported by implementing regulations and mechanisms to enforce rights at local and provincial levels.

2. Ensure Non-Discrimination in Personal Status Law

Personal status systems should be reformed to protect equal rights in marriage, inheritance, custody, and family life, especially for women. Interfaith marriage restrictions and penalties for conversion undermine citizenship and create permanent insecurity.

3. Secure Places of Worship and Cultural Heritage

Protection of religious sites, shrines, cemeteries, manuscripts, and cultural symbols signals that the state values diversity as part of national identity. Heritage protection should be incorporated into national security and reconstruction planning, particularly in post-conflict areas.

4. Guarantee Equal Access to Services and Public Employment

Education, healthcare, humanitarian aid, and public employment must be distributed without sectarian or political bias. Transparent mechanisms help rebuild trust and encourage displaced families to return.

5. Establish Accountability for Hate Speech and Incitement

Governments should adopt legal frameworks to address hate speech, whether by political actors, media outlets, or religious authorities, without restricting legitimate religious expression.

6. Integrate FoRB into National Peace and Development Strategies

FoRB should not be treated as a separate “human rights” issue, but as a cross-cutting pillar of security, development, transitional justice, and reconciliation. Where displaced communities lack protection, reconstruction will fail.

7.2 Recommendations for Civil Society

1. Prioritize Local Ownership and Long-Term Strategies

Civil society should move beyond short-term project cycles by developing institutional strategies rooted in community needs. Donors should support multi-year plans rather than isolated workshops.

2. Expand Women and Youth Leadership

Minority women and youth are already leading cultural, educational, and interfaith initiatives. Their leadership should be recognized, funded, and integrated into national peacebuilding and FoRB networks.

3. Strengthen Inter-Communal Dialogue and Local Mediation

Local dialogue initiatives can prevent escalation, rebuild trust after violence, and support peaceful return of displaced families. Partnerships between clerics, teachers, and community leaders help normalize coexistence.

4. Document Violations and Advocate for Reform

Civil society organizations should systematically document discrimination, displacement, property seizures, and attacks on religious sites. Reliable data supports advocacy, legal action, and international attention.

5. Build Regional Networks

Shared learning between countries facing similar challenges can strengthen capacity. Regional coalitions also reduce the risk that governments dismiss FoRB as an external demand or minority issue.

7.3 Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Institutions

"There is a need to re-examine religious interpretations and remove what is distorted or ideologically manipulated. Religious institutions, platforms, and respected leaders should play a leading role in this process."

1. Promote Inclusive Interpretation of Religious Texts

Religious leaders and scholars should highlight historical and theological traditions of coexistence rooted within religions and regional history. This reframing reduces fear that FoRB threatens faith.

2. Condemn Hate Speech and Incitement

Religious leaders have the moral authority to reject discrimination publicly. Visible condemnation strengthens community confidence and counters extremist narratives.

3. Engage in Interfaith Initiatives

Shared platforms, pilgrimages, cultural events, dialogue circles, demonstrate that coexistence is a public value, not a political slogan.

4. Support Women's Participation

Women serve as teachers, organizers, mediators, and heritage protectors. When religious institutions support their leadership, FoRB becomes visible in daily life.

5. Accept Accountability Mechanisms

Leadership carries responsibility. Institutions should establish internal codes of conduct to prevent the misuse of religious authority for sectarian mobilization or incitement.

7.4 Recommendations for Media and Education

1. Develop FoRB-Sensitive Journalism

Journalists should be trained to cover religious diversity responsibly, avoiding stereotypes and inflammatory language. Codes of ethics protect both expression and dignity.

2. Integrate Diversity into Curriculum

Schools should include the histories, contributions, and cultural heritage of all communities. When children learn to see diversity as part of national identity, stereotypes weaken.

"There is a need for a coordinated dialogue strategy at both political and societal levels. Educational curricula should prepare younger generations for coexistence, and we must rebuild trust among communities affected by conflict and polarization." A Moroccan participant stated.

3. Use Digital Platforms to Promote Inclusive Narratives

Social media can amplify positive examples of coexistence, challenge misinformation, and showcase community resilience, especially among youth.

7.5 Recommendations for International Partners and Donors

1. Support Locally Led Initiatives

International partners should work through regional actors who understand cultural nuances and community needs. Avoiding the perception of "external pressure" increases local legitimacy.

2. Provide Long-Term, Flexible Funding

Short-term grants undermine sustainability. Multi-year support enables civil society to build institutions, not just events.

3. Integrate FoRB into Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Agendas

FoRB should not be siloed. It intersects with education, livelihoods, gender equality, reconstruction, and transitional justice.

4. Protect Activists and At-Risk Communities

Diplomatic advocacy, emergency visas, rapid-response funding, and international monitoring help safeguard activists and religious minorities facing harassment or violence.

5. Support Data Collection and Legal Reform

International actors can assist with research, legal drafting, and technical training to help governments implement FoRB commitments.

Summary

These recommendations emphasize that protecting FoRB is not only a moral responsibility but a practical investment in stability. When communities are free from coercion, states gain legitimacy, return becomes possible after conflict, and coexistence transforms from a fragile expectation into a lived reality.

8. Conclusion and Forward Agenda

The MENAP dialogues and regional analysis confirm that FoRB is not a secondary human rights concern in the MENA. It is a structural foundation of dignity, citizenship, and security. Where FoRB is denied, societies fracture through displacement, mistrust, demographic engineering, or sectarian violence. Where FoRB is protected, citizens invest in rebuilding, trust grows, and institutions gain legitimacy. For example, a human rights activist from Iraq highlighted local initiatives in the Nineveh Plains where youth groups restored both Christian and Yazidi cultural sites in areas previously controlled by ISIS, using cultural heritage as a vehicle for rebuilding trust. In this sense, FoRB is not an aspirational ideal; it is a practical strategy for national resilience.

The evidence from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen demonstrates a clear pattern, coercive coexistence collapses the moment political control weakens. Communities once held together by fear become vulnerable to radicalization and manipulation. Rebuilding after this collapse requires more than physical infrastructure. It requires rights. It requires accountability. It requires the belief that one's identity, dignity, and worship will be respected without coercion. A religious leader participant referenced a post–Lebanese civil war initiative in which Muslim and Christian women engaged in reciprocal village visits, facilitated dialogue tables, and shared cultural and religious experiences.

The MENAP dialogues also revealed a second, equally important truth, the region's cultural and religious heritage already contains the foundations of coexistence. FoRB does not need to be imported; it can be reclaimed. Participants pointed to shared shrines, mutual pilgrimage traditions, local dispute resolution practices, and centuries of cultural exchange as evidence that diversity is rooted in the region's history, not in external advocacy.

Looking forward, the path to protecting FoRB requires multi-level engagement. Governments must reform discriminatory laws and secure places of worship. Civil society requires long-term support, especially for women and youth who lead local peacebuilding. Religious leaders must be empowered to promote coexistence, and held accountable when they incite division. Education systems and media must dismantle stereotypes and build national identity on equal citizenship. International partners should provide protection and resources, while respecting local ownership and cultural context.

FoRB is therefore not a stand-alone reform. It intersects with development, security, heritage, gender, reconstruction, and justice. When FoRB is embedded into these agendas, the result is not only the protection of minorities, but the strengthening of the entire social order.

In a region marked by conflict and displacement, FoRB offers a forward-looking agenda grounded in dignity rather than fear. It transforms fragility into stability, and coexistence into a sustainable public good. The findings of this report make the central argument unmistakable:

"Protecting FoRB is not only about safeguarding belief; it is about enabling peace".

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