

Preventing Violent Extremism by Building Inclusive and Plural Societies: How Freedom of Religion or Belief can help.

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Panel discussion on MENA; 5 Minutes

“There is a lot that can be done to improve FoRB in the MENA region. In the few minutes allotted to me I can only mention a few examples.

Governments should:

1. Respect human rights of all, e.g. in the legal system. When we ask Christians in Syria, Iraq : what will give you confidence to stay and be hopeful about the future, after the immediate need of liberating areas under control of extremist groups, usually they answer: we want to be recognised as citizens, equal under the law. We do not want laws, especially constitutions, to give preference to one religion.

Unfortunately almost all constitutions in the MENA region give a privileged status to Islam. The only development here is in the KRG region in Iraq, were a groups of MP's is working on a draft constitution that does not gives preference to any religion.

Other problematic laws include apostasy laws, blasphemy laws and personal status laws.

2. Promote inclusive, tolerant and pluralistic societies. Important avenues for this are :
 - A. The public discourse. Heads of state and other senior government officials need to publicly promote this message, especially to the national audiences. One positive example is King Jordan of Jordan.
 - B. Education system: both by including the message of pluralism in the curriculum, but also by avoiding the Islamisation of the national school curriculum, esp. language and history classes. Examples include the curriculum changes announced in Egypt last year or in Jordan only last September.
 - C. Interreligious encounters, both high level (religious leaders), but also on a grass root level (including youth, women, etc.)
3. Protect all citizens by not allowing impunity for the perpetrators of violent acts against followers of other religions. In Egypt the victims of sectarian attacks are often forced to participate in 'reconciliation meetings' where they have to forego their right to seek redress and justice through the courts and often have to pay the perpetrators in order for the violence to end. This kind of impunity only encourages more attacks.

Daniel Hoffman



Daniel is Executive Director of Middle East Concern. Since 1995 he has travelled extensively throughout the Middle East and North Africa in to discuss with religious community leaders their plight and appropriate ways to promote freedom of religion and Belief in the region. In 1996 he joined Middle East Concern as their Executive Director. He has also travelled widely in Europe, North America and Asia to create awareness of religious freedom violations in the MENA region and challenge governments and politicians to take action. He holds a Master's Degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the Catholic University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His field research and subsequent Master's Thesis focused on the human rights situation of Christian communities in Syria, Libya and Sudan.