

FCO – Preventing Violent Extremism by Building Inclusive and Plural Societies: How  
Freedom of Religion or Belief Can Help

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**“The Role of FORB Education in Preventing Violent Extremism”**

I was recently in Iraq, and as the liberation of Mosul from ISIS began (October 2016), Prime Minister Abadi spoke to the people of Iraq, saying, “The hour of victory has arrived and operations for the liberation of Mosul have begun. I announce today the start of these heroic operations to free you from the terror and oppression of Da’esh and God willing, soon we will meet on Mosul soil to celebrate liberation and your salvation. And we will live once again with all our religions and sects together.”

You are here today because you want this to be true for every person, not just in Iraq, but around the world. You know that every person has inherent dignity and seeks to be free. Everyone deserves liberty. That is why my organization is called *Hardwired*: every human being is “hardwired” for freedom. We are working to make this possible for more people in the world today.

At Hardwired, we train indigenous leaders in countries experiencing religion-related conflict to advance human dignity and the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for every person through their respective spheres of influence.

And it is working.

Within a few years, Hardwired is able to train up a self-sustaining network of leaders who can implement strategies that will increase legal and social support for the freedom of religion or belief (FORB). Here is an example of Hardwired’s work in Iraq, which presents a microcosm of what we are doing around the world. Following the example, I will explain the pedagogy behind our programs, the ways we measure success, and then I will discuss how governments can employ these methods to prevent and counter extremism in their countries.

*Iraq: A Microcosm of Religious Conflict in the World*

Samy is a Sunni judge in line to be on the Supreme Court in Baghdad. He’s also from an area captured by ISIS. His family did not make it out. He ended up in another position of great influence and wanted to do something to help his family and country. In 2015, Samy was one of 60 leaders who joined Hardwired to discover the importance of freedom of religion or belief in their struggle against terrorism.

This was the first time in Iraq’s history that leaders from every community came together to focus on ways to advance this particular human right together. And it was not an easy conversation to have in the midst of a genocide. For five days Hardwired led a process where Samy and other Muslims joined leaders from the Shabak, Yazidi, Kaka’i, Baha’i,

Atheist, Shi'a, Zoroastrian, Catholic, and Protestant communities to confront head on the deadly consequences that intolerance and violence toward people from other religions and beliefs was having in Iraq.

Day 1 can best be described in two words: distrust and discomfort. Imagine sitting in a room where every person has been scarred by religious oppression and violence. The anger, pain and suffering were palpable. The distrust was heavy. Each participant shared how they or their loved ones had been attacked because of their religion or belief, including by people who represent the other beliefs represented in the room. They all faced the same obstacle to freedom: religious intolerance. And they all needed the same right to safeguard the freedom they most desired to experience: freedom of religion or belief. They had much to consider.

Day 2: resistance and fear. Talking about religion and conflict is hard – even for people who support human rights. Through a series of simulations, activities, and discussions, we begin to unpackage what freedom of religion or belief means. As we listen to the misconceptions participants have about this right, we can tailor the discussion to address those concepts. Often, this leads to discussions on sensitive aspects of freedom of religion or belief – whether religion is an immutable characteristic or a belief that can be changed, whether contradictory and offensive truth claims should be permitted in public, whether governments are the protector of religion or the individual's right to a religion or belief, and to what extent governments can restrict this freedom for public order and other reasons. Step by step, participants discover the fears, misconceptions, and biases they have toward one another and toward the concept of freedom for all. They try to explain what they believe to one another, and recognize that at times their beliefs may be incompatible with the rights and freedoms of others.

Day 3: tension and dissonance. Participants have come face to face with the human dignity of others. Their beliefs, national laws and frameworks for understanding this freedom are insufficient to reconcile what they feel with what this freedom requires. There must be a universal principal for the rights of people of all religions or beliefs. They read Article 18 of the UDHR and ICCPR on the freedom of religion or belief. For many, this creates an internal state of tension.

As facilitators, we are careful not to say what the role of religion should be in society or governance. Too much dissonance will cause participants to shut down, to feel threatened, or to experience anxiety. They need time to recognize and articulate their preconceptions and then engage in activities that allow them to investigate the soundness and utility of their own ideas and those of others. They need to reflect on and modify their conceptual ideas. Therefore, we facilitate an environment that enables participants to begin to develop new ways of thinking and understanding their concepts, beliefs, and attitudes in a safe environment.

Day 4: hope. By the fourth day, a light goes on. We refer to this as an “Aha” moment because a paradigm shift occurs. Participants see one another differently. They begin the process of conceptually moving from actions based on inherent beliefs to new models of

conceptually understanding others and can directly address their fears, bias, misconceptions, and attitudes about others. Then, they can address the issues of intolerance, religious oppression, and violent extremism together.

By the last day, participants are developing strategies and projects that they will then take back to their community to engage others in helping to resolve serious challenges – extremism and violence that result from a lack of respect for the freedom of religion or belief – through directed action. Through repeated applications of the new model they not only influence change, but also refine and solidify their own understanding of freedom of religion or belief and how they can impact long-term change within their community.

As they prepare to leave, Samy and I sit down. He shows me a photo on his i-phone. ISIS has sent him an image of them beheading his youngest brother. It is a warning and a reminder of the life and death reality that awaits every participant as they leave our training and try to apply their new concept of freedom of religion or belief to the realities they will face back home.

But what would make this judge still be willing to risk his life to bring justice to Yazidis, Christians, and many others? It's like he said to me – “If I stay silent, this is the fate that awaits every person in Iraq. If everyone went through Hardwired's training our country would look different.”

Samy believed in human rights before we met him. What changed was his willingness to risk his life to defend this right for others; his empathy for their suffering. He realized that this freedom was not a luxury for the elite in society, a concept to be discussed at conferences and forgotten. It is a sacred key that will unlock a future of freedom for everyone in his country and without which there would be freedom for no one.

*Hardwired's Pedagogy: Education for Conceptual Change About the Freedom of Religion or Belief*

Hardwired's approach is simple, but hard. We instigate conceptual change.

The concept and theory of conceptual change has its basis in the early work of Piaget and has been strongly used in the study of learning in science and developmental psychology. It has more recently been extended to other fields in the social sciences. Conceptual Change refers to the development of new ways of thinking and understanding of concepts, beliefs, and attitudes. This occurs through adding to, deleting, and/or modifying elements of existing concepts, but goes beyond just revising one's beliefs to actually restructure the underlying concepts used to develop those beliefs. Application of conceptual change theory to work on freedom of religion or belief has allowed a deeper look at the process of conceptually moving from actions based on inherent beliefs to new models of conceptual understanding of others and directly addresses the issues of intolerance, religious oppression, and violent extremism.

Hardwired trains teachers and other leaders about freedom of religion or belief, equipping them to effect legal and social change in their communities. When individuals are changed, they can create resiliency against extremist ideologies and violence against vulnerable populations. We participate in this process as facilitators – not lecturers, not cultural experts. Our “students” are the heroes. They are the gatekeepers for change to be unleashed. And that change begins with conceptual change about the rights and freedom of others.

Conceptual change is the first step for any successful FORB educational program – regardless of what age group we are working with. Without this first step, participants will be unable to apply the lessons learned and help their communities become resilient to the ideologies that contribute to violent extremism. Samy’s story and the process our participants in Iraq went through exemplifies what we are doing around the world, and how we are using education in freedom of religion or belief to equip local leaders to prevent and counter violent extremism.

Importantly, Hardwired works to bring about conceptual changes in the way individuals view the rights and freedoms of others and reconcile those ideals to their own beliefs. Conceptual change is not about changing someone’s religion or culture; rather, it is meant to help individuals develop new ways of understanding their religion and culture compared to the freedom of religion or belief.

When, as is often the case, extremist groups actively employ religious terminology in their recruitment efforts and frame their groups’ purposes and existence around religious ideology, the religious dimension of violent extremism cannot be ignored. Through FORB education based in a pedagogy of conceptual change, it is possible to provide communities the tools they need to challenge extremist ideas. The lack of openness and pluralism in a society allows for extremist ideas to fester; this is exacerbated by legal restrictions on speech that prevent extremist ideas from being challenged in the public square. Alternatively, greater freedom enables extremist ideas to be confronted and challenged. That is why Hardwired’s programs facilitate the difficult discussions and model how those leaders can lead others to conceptual change when they leave.

Hardwired’s programs have shown how effectively FORB education helps communities create a framework to address the fears and misconceptions they have of one another, reconcile their beliefs with the new friendships they make, learn how to articulate and defend the rights of others, and mitigate the ideologies that have fomented hatred and intolerance.

### *The Role of FORB Education in Mitigating the Push and Pull Factors of Violent Extremism*

As we move forward, it is important for governments to understand how educational programs that create conceptual changes about the freedom of religion or belief have been shown to mitigate many of the push and pull factors leading individuals into extremism. FORB Educational programs can promote a positive counter-narrative to

extremist ideologies across a broad cross-section of society and create communities in which vulnerable populations have the knowledge and resilience to resist the pull factors. Communities that work together across religious and socioeconomic lines to encourage tolerance, increase pluralistic literacy, and decrease religious oppression are communities that are resilient in the face of violent extremism. The open discussion and exchange of ideas facilitates mutual understanding and religious literacy, which creates an environment where different groups can work together to challenge extremist ideologies and defend vulnerable populations.

The strategy Hardwired employs is as important as the methodologies we use and information that we convey. This strategy is also reflected in the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum's best practices for community-based programs to counter violent extremism. The Forum suggests the following:

- Programs should focus on long-term, sustainable community engagement, rather than “targeting”
- Programs must establish relationships of trust with members of the community, working with (rather than against) local leaders to address grievances and potential problems;
- Engagement should be broad and inclusive, rather than focused on one single community;
- Programs should seek out as partners a variety of leaders from multiple sectors of society, including informal leaders and leaders of different professions, faith groups, genders, and ethnicities;
- Strive to engage youth, as they are the most vulnerable segment of society;
- Empower communities to develop a strong counter-narrative to extremist ideologies and give them the tools to promote this narrative; and tailor programs to the environment and context in which they will be implemented, taking care to address local issues and respect the local context and parameters of engagement.

### *Measuring Success: Tools to Evaluate Long-term Sustainability and Effectiveness of Educational and Training Programs*

Remember, Hardwired begins with the premise that everyone is “hardwired” for freedom. Thus, we are linking the rights someone wants for themselves and their families with a broader picture of how this freedom can permeate their society, including individuals from other traditions and backgrounds. This is conceptual change. Once conceptual change has been achieved, then we can begin to measure the long-term and sustainable impact of our programming to build more inclusive pluralistic societies that will prevent violent extremism.

#### *A. Indicators of Conceptual Change*

Hardwired has six indicators for measuring long-term success; however, before we can get to the indicators of impact we have to first establish conceptual change in attitudes and beliefs. We have found substantial evidence of conceptual change about the rights and freedoms of others among our trainees. Across our trainings, we have found that

participants feel better prepared to defend this freedom for themselves and others and are more hopeful about their ability to ensure justice for others. Participants are more comfortable and articulate when engaging others about the freedom of religion or belief, they are more likely to dialogue with people of different beliefs about this freedom and more aware of the restrictions others face or fears and misconceptions they may have. Participants' knowledge of human rights standards for this freedom are greatly improved; they can teach and explain the source of this freedom within human dignity and they recognize which limitations that are not permitted by the freedom.

An important element needed for conceptual change is to include people with different perspectives in each training to aid in the process of developing respect for the freedom of religion or belief as a right for others, even those with whom someone may disagree. In one country, two-thirds of the participants entered our training believing they could defend the rights of people they disagree with. By the end of the training, everyone was willing to defend people different from their community. In each country and training we undertake, there is a marked increase in the willingness of participants to defend others.

Some aspects of the freedom of religion or belief are harder to understand than others. We can best evaluate conceptual changes that occur between the beginning and the end of the training by focusing in on the difficult concepts that arise in each group of participants. For instance, one indicator that reveals the level of acceptance of freedom of religion or belief is a participants' willingness to allow the government to limit this freedom for communities other than their own.

In one country, 41% of the participants wanted the government to limit how others practiced their faith when we began; by the end of the training 79% of the participants did not want the government to limit how others practiced their faith or apply restrictions in a discriminatory manner. In another country, 86% of the participants believed limitations were always necessary; by the end everyone felt limitations were only permitted in certain situations defined by the law.

Limitations are a challenging area for most groups to understand. Many people are concerned that this freedom will empower extremists to incite violence against other communities. The immediate response is generally to call for restrictions on speech rather than to recognize a) how restrictions on others also jeopardize one's own freedom of religious expression, b) how important public dialogue of religious ideas is to exposing and challenging extremist ideas, and c) there is no freedom for anyone to use religious speech to incite violence against others – in fact, incitement to violence is addressed in Article 20 of the ICCPR and all states have a duty to protect citizens from it. However, by the end of the training, the participants generally make statements that exhibit a more accurate grasp of the limitations that are and are not permitted on religious expression. For instance, in one country, two-thirds of participants wanted the government to restrict what people say about religion or beliefs in the beginning; by the end, there were two-thirds who wanted to protect greater freedom of speech about religion or beliefs. This reveals a growing comfort with open discussions about difficult concepts, which is

healthy for democratic societies and for countering intolerant views that lead to violence and extremism.

Proselytism is another aspect of religious speech entailed in this human right that is often misunderstood. We often confront a general fear that proselytism will disturb the public order. This fear is ultimately rooted in the concern individuals have that someone may leave their faith community or that their religion or belief would no longer dominate the national culture. As these fears are addressed, participants regularly experience a conceptual change about this aspect of the freedom. In one group, 61% believed proselytism was inherently coercive when we began; by the end of the training 83% believed it was a basic human right to share one's belief publicly. Allowing public space for religious truth claims to be explored, discussed and challenged is essential for countering extremist ideologies.

Similarly, conversion is a very controversial aspect of this freedom. In one country, two-thirds of participants felt that individuals had a right to change or choose their religion or belief when we began; by the end everyone supported this aspect of the freedom. The difference between individual and communal rights is another area where participants are experiencing a conceptual change. This can be a difficult concept for acceptance of the freedom of religion or belief in countries where religion is closely connected to national identity. In one country, 59% of participants felt individual rights were more important in the beginning; by the end of the training, support for individual rights increased to 69% of the participants.

Another interesting indicator of success involves how participants feel about their ability to actually effect change in their communities. In one country, 60% of participants did not believe they would be able to influence their government's respect for freedom of religion or belief when we began our trainings, and another 40% were unsure. By the end, half of the participants believed they could convince the government to respect this human right and another half thought it may be possible, while none thought it was impossible. The level of confidence participants experience when they leave the training also correlates with how well they can replicate the program among others and impact their various spheres of influence.

In each country, we observe similar findings related to conceptual change about these different aspects of the freedom of religion or belief. We frequently observe a multiplier effect take place when leaders experience a conceptual change and become motivated to impact change. In one country, trainees adapted our program for different audiences and conducted additional trainings within their country. One trainee in particular, trained two other leaders who helped him replicate the program with nearly 300 college students. Many of those students, in turn, were so motivated by the new understanding of freedom of religion or belief that they risked their lives to protest the death sentence placed on a Christian woman accused of apostasy. As a result of their actions and the actions of others, the woman was eventually released from prison. This is one example of how conceptual change can lead to a ripple effect that accelerates the pace of change in

society. An important element of success in this regard is to include leaders who can influence different sectors of society in each training.

Often, participants arrive with little awareness of the discrimination facing other communities, or of the specific ways freedom of religion or belief protects individuals from discriminatory laws and policies, and most have major misconceptions about others. In addition, most participants cannot articulate whether their national laws are consistent with international standards for freedom of religion or belief or how to communicate this right for anyone other than themselves and their own community. In each case, the leaders we train experience a marked shift in their concepts and beliefs by the end of the training.

Throughout our trainings, participants expressed comments about their experience that reinforced our pre and post observations of conceptual change. Most significantly, participants emerged with a stronger sense of their own human dignity and value, knowledge of rights they didn't know existed and how to access them, and expressed how empowered they felt to defend their rights and be willing to defend others.

### *B. Indicators of Impact*

In addition to the examples of conceptual change mentioned above, the leaders Hardwired has trained exhibit a significant ability to carry on the work of freedom of religion or belief in their various spheres of influence. We have also documented a significant rate at which our trainees have replicated their new understanding and impacted various sectors of society.

First, we look at the rate at which participants we train can replicate the program with others in their various spheres of influence. Second, we look at the impact participants have on governance and laws affecting the rights and freedoms of others. Third, we measure the ability of participants to increase awareness in the public about this freedom, through traditional and social forms of media or other public vehicles. Fourth, we look for indicators that our participants are able to mitigate conflict, prevent attacks on others, and ultimately contribute to greater local and national security. Fifth, as a result of our participants' ability to improve local security and create communities resilient to extremism, we anticipate greater economic opportunities for minorities and the government more broadly, as the government may be more likely to attract investors in these communities and experience greater opportunities for business and tourism that benefit everyone. Finally, we measure the rate at which more individuals are becoming educated about their rights and freedoms, particularly in the public schools through lessons taught and curriculum reforms undertaken.

Journalists have dramatically increased the space for information about violations of this human right and had a direct impact on public opinion as a result. In Iraq, participants and local partners worked together to mobilize their communities against a new identity card law that if promulgated would have forced children to convert to Islam and denied the freedom of others to identify according to the religion of their choice. A Muslim

Brotherhood leader changed his position and decided that he would defend the right of atheists and other minorities to have equal rights in the new constitution being written in Iraqi Kurdistan. Their efforts resulted in specific changes to the laws and policies that governed this freedom. In Sudan, participants drafted a provision for freedom of religion or belief that they convinced communist leaders to endorse, while the lawyers we trained have taken several cases to challenge discriminatory laws that affect this freedom. Participants have generally replicated the training at a rate of about twenty to one. New educational courses have been developed and implanted in each country. And in the midst of all of the ways leaders are impacting change, they are doing it in collaboration with people from different religions and beliefs.

### *Lessons for Global Engagement: Educational Initiatives That Work*

Without a coordinated and robust international effort to educate society about the rights and freedoms every person is entitled to, the psychological effects of terrorist groups like ISIS will be seen for generations, fomenting greater chaos and instability in the world. Recognizing the danger of education and educational materials in disseminating and reinforcing extremist ideology Stuart Levy, U.S. Treasury Undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, called for a focus on educational reforms. The impact of Saudi education and materials exemplifies this problem. Levy wrote, “Unless the next generation of children is taught to reject violent extremism, we will forever be faced with the challenge of disrupting the next group of terrorists.”

Educational reform is critical, and as efforts in the Middle East and North Africa have proven thus far, such programs must work toward building conceptual change to be effective. Hardwired’s programs have shown the ability of educational and training programs that prioritize conceptual change to not only impact several sectors of society – governance, media, security, economics, and public school education – but to also contribute to preventing violent extremism.

With respect to public education, several governments in the Middle East and North Africa have sought to reform their educational systems and curricula to create societies that are resilient to extremism. Given the scale of intolerance in textbooks throughout the region, much work needs to be done. Much of the reform has focused on changes in Islamic education courses and promoting alternative narratives in the religious space. However, the governments working on educational reforms are facing internal challenges and resistance required to effectively implement them. More importantly, all of the current reform attempts focus on the content of curriculum without any discussion of the need for critical thinking and methodologies that lead to conceptual changes in beliefs about the equal rights and dignity of the religious “Other”.

Unless we address the root causes of intolerance through a pedagogy based on conceptual change in the attitudes and beliefs about the freedom of religion or belief, we will be unable to attain or sustain long-term resiliency against extremism.

In addition to curriculum reform, there is a critical need for teacher training that leads these gatekeepers of the next generation to their own conceptual change about the equal dignity and rights of others. Once teachers have been transformed, they can begin to help children build greater respect for others, which will contribute to the long-term impact of educational reforms.

As an example of how this process may work, two Yazidi teachers we trained in Iraq exhibited the impact of education for freedom of religion or belief in countering and preventing extremism. Ghanam and Jalal were themselves displaced by ISIS before starting an organization that trains youth in the various displacement camps spread throughout northern Iraq. As part of our training, they developed a lesson plan to teach their students about the freedom of religion or belief. In their lesson, these teachers took their students to a garden and described how beautiful the garden was. The students were then asked to pick any flowers they wanted except for those of one color. When they gathered together again, the students looked at the garden and saw that it was not as pretty as before. The teachers described how the garden depicted their country, “When ISIS came, they destroyed everyone who didn’t look like them.”

Then, the teachers challenged the students to partner with someone from a different belief and take a packet of seeds to plant together. As they began, they learned about how each had suffered, and then they returned to the garden. Throughout the course, they were taught lessons on the freedom of religion or belief and discussed what that meant for Iraq and their own communities.

One student shared how he learned that a Muslim in his displacement camp was forced to leave by ISIS too. He didn’t realize before that Muslims also suffered and it changed his perception of them. The teacher showed them how beautiful the garden is when everyone is represented and the students agreed. They shared stories about how the garden changed their perception of others and made them realize the importance of freedom of religion or belief for everyone to experience freedom in their country.

Another teacher who attended Hardwired’s program developed lessons to teach about freedom of religion or belief in a mixed religion school for refugees. When Muslim parents petitioned him to segregate classes by gender, he discussed the importance of freedom of religion or belief with them and why we must avoid religious imposition and instead practice coexistence and tolerance, and how tactics such as gender segregation are utilized by extremists such as ISIS to subjugate people. In the end, the teacher did not have to separate the students.

As I left Iraq a few days ago, it was encouraging to see the continuous impact of the training begun over a year ago. Upon hearing Ghanam and Jalal’s success among youth in the displacement camps, the Director of the Ministry of Religious Affairs was so moved that he has committed to having every student take their lesson and plant gardens throughout Kurdistan – that is 1.8 million children who will learn to respect this freedom and defend their communities from extremism. The Director’s commitment to

educational reform is indicative of the critical role governments have to play in supporting change at the local level.

### *Conclusion*

Looking forward, we have much to learn from programs that focus on freedom of religion or belief to counter violent extremism around the world and wherever oppression rears its ugly head. As Prime Minister Abadi declared, it is time to free the oppressed from terror and seek a future where we can all live together in peace. The growing threat of radicalization and terrorism places a greater burden on governments and practitioners to move quickly – and this requires that we begin to prioritize conceptual change in our pedagogy, methodologies and strategies to educate those most vulnerable to radicalization, our local leaders and our youth.