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the Christian
Academic Forum
for Citizenship

A Southwestern Asian and North African Response to Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) has recently emerged as a significant framework in international forums. Several governments have appointed Special Envoys or Ambassadors to monitor its status locally, regionally, and globally. International organizations and academic institutions have published research and human rights reports in which the Southwestern Asian and North African (SWANA) countries score very low regarding religious freedom and blasphemy laws. So far, however, SWANA stakeholders have yet to produce a wholistic response.

To develop such a response, Dar al-Kalima University, jointly with the Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship in the Arab World (CAFCAW), organized a consultation gathering 20 secular, atheist, agnostic, and faith-based (Muslim and Christian) scholars and experts from multi and interdisciplinary fields - representatives from civil society organizations, religious-based institutions, universities, national human rights/women's rights groups, and SWANA sectoral bodies coming from Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, UAE, Egypt, Morocco, and diaspora communities in Europe.

The consultation took place in Limassol, Cyprus, on December second and third, 2022. Three key themes were tackled: 1) FoRB, Political Agendas and the Context of SWANA; 2) FoRB, Religious and Non-Religious Individual and Community Rights, and Diversity Management in SWANA; 3) FoRB, Personal Status Laws and Gender Equality in SWANA. Through workshops, brainstorming sessions, and formal and informal discussions, we, the participants, have explored these themes, outlined their backgrounds and formulated recommendations and suggestions for concrete actions.

First, we affirm that there have been long struggles for freedom in SWANA, facing colonialism, occupation, socio-economic marginalization, authoritarianism, and patriarchy. Against this background, we value the freedom of religion or belief, but we also insist on contextualizing policies related to FoRB, considering the region's socio-economic conditions, communal structures, and policy challenges.

Second, we see FoRB as an integral element of a wholistic approach to the relentless quest for a civic, democratic state which promotes the rule of law and protects liberties and for an empowered and inclusive civil society. We doubt that FoRB can be successfully implemented in SWANA without adopting such a comprehensive approach.

Third, we are concerned about the possibility of misusing FoRB in SWANA as a concept and platform for populism, religious nationalism, sectarianism, and polarization, resulting in more violent conflicts, and thus, national, regional, and international uncertainty and instability.

However, we also recognize that FoRB can support the concerted efforts in promoting, lobbying for, and adopting optional civil personal status laws in SWANA countries, which would help further advance women's rights and gender equality. For instance, such a change would offer people of different faiths and beliefs the freedom to choose if they want a religious or civil marriage or an interfaith marriage without being forced to convert.

Lastly, we welcome a constructive dialogue with FoRB ambassadors and national, regional, and international stakeholders to enhance common understanding and explore potential collaboration.