

International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance

From Populist to not yet Popular

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Under the title “Protecting Human Rights from Exclusionary Populism,” Harvard’s Gerald Neuman contributed to a 2023 publication, concluding his contribution¹ with some critical paragraphs on the International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance.

“The Trump administration also established a so-called International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance, enlisting primarily right-wing populist governments such as Hungary, Poland, and Brazil. The Alliance enabled religiously intolerant governments to claim attachment to religious liberty by protesting persecution of their own coreligionists, and to argue for the supremacy of religious freedom over the human rights of women and sexual minorities. The new administration has continued in the Alliance, providing its Secretariat in the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and leading one of its working groups (on threats posed by technology). The United States could resign from the Alliance, but it should consider expanding and reforming it. Rights-respecting countries reluctant to join a project of Mike Pompeo might be willing to contribute to a genuinely evenhanded approach to religious freedom that is recalibrated to be consistent with the human rights of all. Actual religious persecution is definitely a serious problem in the world, and a diverse group of governments willing to help enforce existing international standards could decrease it – particularly if they are sufficiently diverse and committed to examining their own failings as well as those of others. A reconfigured alliance could support the

1 Neuman, Gerald: “Protecting Human Rights from Exclusionary Populism,” in: Christopher Sabatini (ed.), *Reclaiming Human Rights in a Changing World Order*, Washington D. C./London: Brookings Institution 2023, pp. 123–148, pp. 141–142.

work of existing human rights mechanisms rather than attempting to undermine or replace them. Domestically, the effort might also draw some religious constituencies back toward shared values and away from populist divisiveness. The problem of participation in the Alliance illustrates a disadvantage of convening states as admitted members in a standing organization to address the challenges of populism. Membership becomes a credential that may be undeserved from the outset and that is politically very difficult to withdraw, even after changes in a member's government."

I will try to respond to the challenge that Neuman presented based on my own experience as the Netherlands' representative between February 2020 and September 2022, as a member of the Steering Committee over the same period and chair in 2021. I will refer to publicly available documentation published until March 2023 and take not into account developments since. Please accept that I cannot reveal a number of details in national decision-making nor bilateral consultations. Moreover, I also will not quote from International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) documentation not published on IRFBA's webpage, hosted by the United States (U.S.) Department of State.

The alliance

IRFBA is "a network of like-minded countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world."² According to the website – hosted by the U.S. Department of State – 37 countries have joined the alliance. There are also five IRFBA friends, and three IRFBA observers, including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The idea for an alliance

In July 2018 and 2019, the U.S. Department of State hosted two ministerials to advance religious freedom. In the margins of the second meeting, the U.S. hosts announced their initiative to build an "International Religious Freedom

2 U.S. Department of State: International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

Alliance³. A number of invited partners – such as members of the International Contact Group (ICG) on FoRB – were critical for a number of reasons:

A concept of the Trump administration

For some European countries leading on the issue of FoRB, associating with this “Trump thing”⁴ was a risky affair. At the 2019 ministerial, both secretary of state Pompeo and IRF ambassador Brownback referred to “protecting a common, *unalienable* human right” and Secretary Pompeo announced the establishment of the “Commission on Unalienable Rights.”⁵ He had presented the plan in an article in the Wall Street Journal a week before the ministerial and claimed that “[h]uman-rights advocacy has lost its bearings and become more of an industry than a moral compass.”⁶

Against the backdrop of earlier Trump administration initiatives (like the “Mexico City Policy”⁷ and the instrumentalization of religion⁸), this raised suspicion that was justified when the Commission started its discussions, held hearings and presented its report.⁹

3 Banks, Adelle M.: “As religious freedom summit ends, State Department announces new alliance, sanctions” (18 Jul. 2019), <https://religionnews.com/2019/07/18/as-religious-freedom-summit-ends-state-department-announces-new-alliance-sanctions/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

4 An expression used later by an anonymous Biden administration staff member.

5 U.S. Department of State: 2019 Ministerial To Advance Religious Freedom, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/2019-ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023; italics by the author.

6 U.S. Department of State: Unalienable Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Founders’ Principles Can Help Revitalize Liberal Democracy World-wide (7 Jul. 2019), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/unalienable-rights-and-u-s-foreign-policy-the-founders-principles-can-help-revitalize-liberal-democracy-world-wide/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

7 Hellmann, Jessie: “Trump reinstates ban on US funding for abortion overseas” in: (23 Jan. 2017), <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/abortion/315652-trump-signs-executive-order-reinstating-global-gag-rule-on/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

8 Casey, Shaun: “How the State Department Has Sidelined Religion’s Role in Diplomacy” (5 Sep. 2017), <https://religionandpolitics.org/2017/09/05/how-the-state-department-has-sidelined-religions-role-in-diplomacy/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

9 U.S. Department of State: Commission on Unalienable Rights, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/commission-on-unalienable-rights/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

The International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

This forum – comprising senior policy officers of nearly 30 like-minded countries – was established by Canada in June 2015 to encourage and deepen coordination between countries committed to advancing FoRB for all. The contact group is co-chaired by Canada and the United States.¹⁰ While it was mentioned in the Potomac Plan of Action (a result of the 2018 ministerial) to “support collective action”¹¹, it now seemed to become sidelined by an initiative of the principals of one of the co-chairs.

IRF instead of FoRB

The difference between the U.S. acronym IRF and the UN/EU acronym FoRB warrants some background details to better understand European resistance. In 1998, the U.S. enacted an International Religious Freedom Act, implying a wide range of statutory institutions and obligations such as a bipartisan Commission (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom – USCIRF), an ambassador-at-large, and an annual report by the Department of State. The 2016 Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act amended the 1998 Act by specifically extending protection to non-theists, as those who do not claim any particular religion.

The freedom not to believe was expressed explicitly in the 2018 Potomac Declaration: “Every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, *or none at all*, and enjoys the freedom to change faith.”¹² However, political, oral, language was less clear, like in the statements by secretary Pompeo and ambassador Brownback at the Washington Ministerial in 2019. Against the backdrop of the distrust of especially western-European partners and the tradition in

10 Government of Canada: International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (31 Aug. 2023), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/freedom-religion-liberte-group_groupe.aspx?lang=eng, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

11 See under “Strengthening the Response” at U.S. Department of State: Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom Potomac Plan of Action, <https://www.state.gov/ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom-potomac-plan-of-action/>, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023.

12 U.S. Department of State: Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom Potomac Declaration, <https://www.state.gov/ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom-potomac-declaration/>, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023; italics by the author.

Europe to explicitly include “belief” or “faith” in all expressions, this ambiguity made partners critical of an IRF alliance.

Technical, language and legal aspects

When ambassador Brownback solicited for support while visiting the Hague in November 2019 and addressing a meeting of the ICG on FoRB (co-chaired by the architect of his plan), he held a passionate plea for “action by senior politicians, based on consensus.” With the IRF Act dating over 20 years, he wanted to “get into action, call people mandated to act.” Although his audience was sympathetic to this personal ambition, he somewhat received a cold shoulder. Delegates made a number of comments on the issues mentioned above and raised questions about the risk of undermining the multilateral system, the relationship with internationally agreed language and intersectionality with (wider) human rights. Apart from that, partners were critical on technical issues, financing and governance. None of the ICG members committed to the plan.

Eliminating misconceptions, changing principles

Brownback now mandated his staff to negotiate with a number of partners – notably Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and The United Kingdom (UK) – to generate support and accommodate partners’ insights. Countries like Germany, France and Italy and the EU’s European External Action Service (EEAS) did not participate but were informed by the others.

Knox Thames and his team could not easily overcome the mistrust against perceived Trump administration objectives but could at least clear the sky as much as the language. The small group of ICG-FoRB partners mentioned – advised by the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed – were able to change the text and spirit of the IRFA principles, leading to a Declaration of Principles published on February 5, 2020, when secretary Pompeo officially launched the alliance with an initial membership of 27 countries.¹³ The

13 Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Senegal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States. (Banks, Adelle M.: “More than two dozen countries

UK and the Netherlands joined – “in good company” – whereas Canada, Denmark, Norway and Sweden delayed a decision.

Sound principles of the alliance

When reading the principles, one may notice the influence of European thinking and adaptation to multilateralism. The UN Special Rapporteur and European partners underlined: “The actions of the alliance are intended to complement existing work to promote freedom of religion or belief within the United Nations and other competent multilateral and regional organizations.”¹⁴

Brownback presented the IRFA “as more a network than an alliance, with consensual decision taking and not meant to take sanctions,” adding that there is “a pretty high bar” for countries included in the group: “We want nations that respect religious freedom in their own country, obviously act that way, and then are willing to push religious freedom in international venues.”¹⁵ Brownback’s “pretty high bar” triggered expectations and comments such as those by Humanists UK: “The ‘Declaration of Principles’ of the Alliance in some places uses religiously exclusive language (much as does the Alliance’s name), but in many places is inclusive of the non-religious [...] Some members of the Alliance include strong defenders of freedom of religion or belief, such as the Netherlands, but also countries with regressive human rights records, such as Brazil, Hungary, and Poland.”¹⁶

The members’ commitments are very ambitious indeed, like upholding their state obligations under international law in general, being inclusive, including cross-regional engagement and being committed to pursuing internal-external coherence on matters relating to FoRB. They also commit to

launch new religious freedom alliance” [6 Feb. 2020], <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/02/06/more-two-dozen-countries-launch-new-religious-freedom-alliance>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.)

14 U.S. Department of State: Declaration of Principles for the International Religious Freedom Alliance (5 Feb. 2020), <https://www.state.gov/declaration-of-principles-for-the-international-religious-freedom-alliance/>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

15 Banks: Two dozen.

16 Humanists UK: UK signs up to US-led ‘International Religious Freedom Alliance’ (6 Feb. 2020), <https://humanists.uk/2020/02/06/uk-signs-up-to-us-led-international-religious-freedom-alliance/>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

taking “a human rights-based approach” to advancing FoRB (essential for European partners and the UN Special Rapporteur), and promote other human rights that are indispensable for the full enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief.

Moreover, IRFA members should also feel confronted: in a number of founding member states, *registration* is an issue as well as the *intersectionality*, with both being perceived as leading to exclusion and the conflicting implementation of human rights.

Putting words into practice

From the outset, Brownback surrounded himself as chair with trusted partners, inviting the Brazilian, Netherlands and UK representatives to join the Steering Committee and creating an Informal Council of Experts of renowned experts and trusted IRF friends.¹⁷ In early March 2020, a first working meeting took place in Geneva, elaborating the Declaration of Principles and the work agenda. That meeting was held *back to back* with the regular meeting of the ICG on FoRB, and in the margins of the regular session of the UN Human Rights Council. IRFA members briefed their ICG friends and discussed prospects for membership with Canada, Denmark, Norway and Sweden and discussed the option of becoming a “friend” at least.

From then, IRFA started meeting on a monthly basis, including virtually due to Covid. Since ambassador Brownback had shown that he was prepared to also adopt the “B” in the alliance’s name, Denmark was easily able to join in mid-2020 when the name was changed into the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Norway followed slightly later.

At the Geneva meeting, the Netherlands – connecting to a suggestion of Kosovo at IRFA’s launch, and supported by Gambia in Geneva – proposed discussing the nexus “Gender and FoRB.” The Dutch initiative built on a Danish-Norwegian initiated report “Promoting FoRB and Gender Equality in the Con-

17 The Steering Committee members were João Lucas Quental Novaes de Almeida, minister in the Brazilian Foreign ministry (until summer 2023); Jos Douma, the Netherlands Special Envoy for Religion and Belief (until mid-2022); and Rehman Chishty, MP and the PM’s Special Envoy on Religion or Belief (until mid-September 2020). The composition of the Informal Council of Experts is never formally disclosed.

text of the SDGs,” presented in the margins of the UN Human Rights Council.¹⁸ While still a friend of IRFA and prior to joining the alliance, Denmark took the initiative to lead the workgroup. The group regularly briefed the plenary meetings and drafted relevant parts of the joint statements at the Ministers’ Forums in 2020 and 2021, and a specific statement for the London FoRB Ministerial in July 2022.

Estonia led the “Protecting Religious Sites Workgroup,” preparing a statement on the protection of places of worship. It was adopted at the Ministers’ Forum in November 2020.¹⁹ The subject had received attention in special sessions ever since, including in a statement issued at the London Ministerial in July 2022.²⁰

Shortly after the launch of the alliance, Australia joined it, represented by its ambassador in Washington. Ambassador Sinodinos joined the Steering Committee and presented the idea to study the abolishment of the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy. The discussions in the Australia-led workgroup resulted in a report prepared by external experts and supported by members of the workgroup named “Killing in the Name of God,” published in autumn 2021. It inspired the civil society organization (CSO) Jubilee Campaign to start a lobby for amending the UN resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty, due in November 2022. IRFBA members were not effective in supporting this lobbying in the preparatory process, but eventually eighteen IRFBA members released a well-documented statement to support

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- 18 Petersen, Marie Juul: Promoting freedom of religion or belief and gender equality in the context of the sustainable development goals: A focus on access to justice, education and health. Reflections from the 2019 expert consultation process, Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Human Rights 2020, https://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/document/_%2019_02922-22%20ofreedom_of_religion_or_belief_gender_equality_and_the_sustainable_development_%20ofd%20487747_1_1.PDF, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.
- 19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia: International religious freedom alliance adopts an Estonia-led Declaration on Safe Places of Worship (8 Nov. 2020), <https://vm.ee/en/news/international-religious-freedom-alliance-adopts-estonia-led-declaration-safe-places-worship>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.
- 20 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, United Kingdom: Statement on freedom of religion or belief and cultural heritage (7 Jul. 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-cultural-heritage-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-cultural-heritage>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

the initiative, just before the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Third Committee cast a vote.²¹

At the launching dinner, the Foreign Minister of Togo suggested an initiative for an African vision for FoRB. It was worked out by Togolese diplomats and U.S. experts, supported by some members of the Steering Committee and Council of Experts. They developed a stimulating concept note, with a view to garner wide African support for FoRB before the 2063 jubilee of the African Union. This is yet to be followed up. Other workgroups such as those on education, humanitarian aid and technology were less productive yet.

In November 2020, the first annual meeting took place, called the Ministers' Forum and held in the margins of the (virtual) Warsaw Ministerial to Advance FoRB.²² The collective IRFBA statement – adopted by consensus – offers useful insight into aspirations, work programs and accomplishments,²³ as does the statement of the (also virtual) 2021 Ministers' Forum.²⁴ Some ambitions such as taking country action as a group regrettably proved too far-fetched.

In every respect, it was clear that the IRFBA was a US-driven entity, but already under Brownback's chairmanship the monthly meetings had a structure and climate facilitating a true and open discussion. Active participants learned to cooperate, exchange information and stimulate coordinated – if not common – action. However, it also became clear that the IRFBA was not very different from other international alliances and coalitions, in the sense that only a small number of participants were active, as shown by participation in so-called deep dives (closed-door discussions on topics and country issues) and

21 U.S. Department of State: IRFBA Statement on Blasphemy and Related Offences (7 Nov. 2022), <https://www.state.gov/irfba-statement-on-blasphemy-and-related-offences/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

22 Please note that this ministerial was held to advance FoRB and no longer IRF. For more details, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland: Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/FORB2020>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

23 U.S. Department of State: A Shared Vision for Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief for All (17 Nov. 2020), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/a-shared-vision-for-advancing-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-for-all/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

24 U.S. Department of State: Statement from the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Ministers' Forum (23 Nov. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/statement-from-the-international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance-ministers-forum/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

Twitter campaigns. Some Twitter campaigns like those by the U.S., UK and Netherlands (supported by Canada and Sweden) on the plight of Bahá'ís in Iran and another one to support the leader of the Nigerian humanists attracted considerable attention.

Consolidation and striving for effectiveness

As a consequence of the U.S. presidential elections in November 2020, Ambassador Brownback stepped back as chair in January 2021 and was replaced by the Netherlands Special Envoy.²⁵ The Dutch chair – strongly supported by the secretariat in the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State – consolidated the alliance. By Summer 2021, a set of rules and procedures has been adopted and implemented.

Apart from structuring the alliance as a body, the Dutch chair also invested in honoring the commitments. *Internal-external coherence* was placed on the agenda by asking one member to describe internal issues by responding to the fact that it was listed in the 2021 Open Doors' World Watch List. The member made a presentation and entered into discussion, but also protested – supported by others – against the introduction of peer reviews.

The chair also involved the Council of Experts in placing “current issues” on the agenda, hoping that a discussion would lead to coordinated action to *challenge persistent violations and abuses*. Supported by the new UK Envoy Fiona Bruce MP, the chair and secretariat increased the frequency of group statements.

IRFBA has added value to many member states' activities on FoRB. Even during the Covid period, when it only met virtually, IRFBA facilitated member states representatives to *familiarize* themselves with issues and colleagues. Initiatives like the Estonian-led declaration on religious sites offered members confronted with actual conflicts and/or legacies of war and occupation an opportunity to make their plight heard and recognized. Moreover, the Togolese initiative for an African view on FoRB – for instance – generated a lively dis-

25 Since Rehman Chishty had stepped down as the UK Envoy, the vice chair was vacant and taken by Australia. Chishty's successor as PM's Special Envoy – Fiona Bruce – joined the Steering Committee, as well as the Director of the IRF Office in the State Department, Dan Nadel (since no new IRF Ambassador had been nominated yet). João Lucas Quental Novaes de Almeida stayed on for Brazil.

cussion in the Council of Experts – but not among member states – on the importance of *tradition* when propagating and defending FoRB.

After taking over as chair as of January 2022, the UK PM's Envoy for FoRB invested in involving members, enlarging the alliance, preparing the London Ministerial in July 2022 and intensifying cooperation with the Council of Experts. Furthermore, there was the first country visit (Algeria) for an IRFBA chair. In March and November 2022 and March 2023, the chair profited from the relaxing of Covid measures to host physical meetings again in Geneva in the margins of the UN Human Rights Council session, and in New York in the margins of the Third Committee meetings.

IRFBA is “consensual” and “voluntary,” with all positive and negative consequences. Given the capacity of many of the members’ Ministries of Foreign Affairs,²⁶ it was to be expected that only a limited number of member states’ representatives intervene in IRFBA meetings and/or contribute to statements. Nonetheless, IRFBA still falls short of ambassador Brownback’s ambition to “*get into action, call people mandated to act.*”

A striking example is a statement made in December 2021 on the situation of Jehovah’s Witnesses.²⁷ Only twelve member states supported the statement – the lowest score between all the statements made – whereas no reference was made to any specific country and the text was strict rights-oriented.

Similarly, the alliance and its members fail to follow up the statements made. As Knox Thames wrote: “the challenge is ensuring these efforts move beyond statements to consequential diplomacy that prompts change on the ground for the persecuted.”²⁸ Only in one particular case was sound follow-up noticed. Many IRFBA members supported a UK-initiated statement on Afghanistan in September 2021²⁹ and – although the details escaped public attention – the U.S. and Brazil have cooperated since then in facilitating mem-

26 As one member put it: “How can I ask for support for a statement on Myanmar when we don’t have an embassy over there and a small regional department?”

27 U.S. Department of State: Statement on Jehovah’s Witnesses (17 Dec. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance-statement-on-jehovahs-witnesses/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

28 Thames, Knox: Five Predictions for 2022 (31 Dec. 2021), <https://www.knoxthames.com/post/five-predictions-for-2022>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

29 U.S. Department of State: International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Statement on Afghanistan (10 Sep. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance-statement-on-afghanistan/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

bers of religious minorities to emigrate from Afghanistan to safe countries, including Brazil.

Since early 2023, most statements are only made by the IRFBA chair. IRFBA's credentials and solidarity were tested seriously in the aftermath of the London Ministerial, when one of the adopted statements on "freedom of religion or belief and gender equality"³⁰ was removed from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) website a few days after the meeting, changed without true consultation of all 22 signatories and posted again with the original date ("updated 7 July"), with a mere eight signatories. The FCDO kept the original preamble, with as its last paragraph: "As such, FoRB serves not only to protect people from discrimination, inequality, and violence; it can also serve as a source of empowerment for those who find inspiration and strength in their convictions to fight for gender equality and justice."

However, by deleting a reference to "discriminatory personal status laws," they undermined a central objective of IRFBA – the freedom for women to choose their religion – and deleting reference to "sexual and reproductive health and rights" and "bodily autonomy" they in effect undermined the image of FoRB, exemplified by the new last sentence: "support and build capacities of local religious and belief leaders."

The FCDO defended its action by stating that "it made the changes in order to focus on core issues and ensure consensus between signatories"³¹ and "to

30 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, United Kingdom: Statement on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality (7 Jul. 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

31 Davies, Lizzy: "UK under international pressure over deletion of abortion commitments" (22 Jul. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/22/european-countries-pressurise-uk-over-removal-of-abortion-commitments-liz-truss>; Davies, Lizzy: "UK in diplomatic standoff over deletion of abortion rights from gender statement" (28 Jul. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/28/uk-in-diplomatic-standoff-over-deletion-of-abortion-rights-from-gender-statement>. The matter prompted the Guardian to criticize the ministerial at large in a third article, complaining about dignitaries and organizations invited, as if they were there due to their conservative views on certain women's rights: Davies, Lizzy: "UK government honoured anti-abortion figure before editing women's rights statement" (9 Aug. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/>

make the final statement more inclusive of all perspectives and views, to allow for a constructive exchange of views on all issues.”³²

Evaluation

Neuman advised the Biden administration not to resign from IRFBA but rather expand and reform the alliance, recalibrated to be consistent with the human rights of all. Reflecting on his comments, some “right-wing populist” governments were indeed eager to join, but – what Neuman calls – “rights-respecting countries” also accepted the invitation after the Trump administration accommodated their wishes and international norms. Therefore, reform and recalibration and the aspiration of a genuinely evenhanded approach to religious freedom started from the date of inception. However, the UK Foreign Secretary’s action after the London Ministerial shows how difficult it is to be consistent in this. IRFBA’s relationship with the wider human rights environment might therefore continue to suffer from “mutual misunderstanding and bias entrenchment.”³³

IRFBA’s history till early 2023 has proven to be a track record of balanced statements, not merely in support of “coreligionists” of certain member states, as Neuman feared. One might wonder why IRFBA did not go further and truly take action. As a consensual network of states with different traditions and priorities, IRFBA’s effectiveness is still limited after three years. Moreover, by studying the series of statements made, one might also question why some governments abstained from a number of statements. Indeed, it is striking that statements from early 2023 have only been issued by the chair.

The ambiguous support for statements, the lack of follow-up, the passive role of quite some members – in particular those from Africa – and the ar-

aug/09/uk-government-award-anti-abortion-figure-sam-brownback-edited-reproductive-rights-statement, all three articles accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

32 UK Parliament: International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (21 Jul. 2022), <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-21/h1992>, accessed on: 27 Aug. 2023.

33 A term used by Knox Thames/Peter Mandeville: “Maintaining International Religious Freedom as a Central Tenet of U.S. National Security,” in: United States Institute of Peace no. 513 (2022), p. 7, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sr_513_international-religious-freedom-us-national-security.pdf, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

ticated position of (members of) the Council of Experts (whose composition is not publicly available) may undermine a balanced diplomatic approach and create the risk of IRFBA not being seen to promote FoRB as a human right but rather as a voice of the Global North, representing Christian interests.

Some member states may have argued for “supremacy” of IRF over other rights – as Neuman feared – but there are no records of them doing so in IRFBA meetings, apart from one or two ministers explicitly referring to only the plight of persecuted Christians. Moreover, I should add that the opposite is also not the case: no member state has ever argued for supremacy of “human rights of women and sexual minorities” over freedom of religion or belief. The principles adopted as of February 5, 2020 and the fruitful cooperation with and participation by the UN Special Rapporteurs on FoRB have proven that IRFBA is fully supportive of the human rights complex and the work of existing human rights mechanisms.

The consecutive chairs have made serious efforts to mind internal-external coherence, but some of the founding members still do not like “examining their own failings as well as those of others,” as Neuman put it. Even more, examining the failings of others is also not welcome by some of those members, as indicated by support for the statements made.

All chairs between 2020 and 2023 attempted an *inclusive approach, including cross-regional engagement*, although expanding proved difficult. IRFBA is still too much of a Global North engagement. The number of states with a Christian majority and/or tradition is far larger than the number of – for instance – Muslim majority countries. The principles and the criteria for membership are a prime hindrance for involving more states in the Global South. The number of countries respecting relevant articles in the ICCPR – subscribing to the 1981 United Nations Declaration – let alone the EU Guidelines on FoRB is limited.

Additionally, some “rights-respecting countries” remain reluctant to join. The European Union – its FoRB Guidelines being mentioned in the Statement of Principles – is sorely missed. This reluctance can be related to the burden of the Trump administration, with persisting fear of undermining or replacing existing human rights mechanisms, or with diverging priorities if not values.

Added value is still to be proven, since coordinated action does not depend on having a wide alliance. The results might also be achieved between (some) individual states and the multilateral structures.³⁴

34 Take – for instance – Uzbekistan, which was a Country of Particular Concern for the U.S. from 2006 until 2017. After a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, the

Although IRFBA was initially seen by some as threatening the International Contact Group on FoRB, its focus on advocacy has identified perspectives for the ICG to concentrate on FoRB as a human right per se, and for concertation and cooperation in the UN framework. Accordingly, Knox Thames was partly correct when he wrote in the weeks before the 2022 London Ministerial on FoRB: “countries have *strengthened their coordination*” through the IRFBA, which now includes 40 nations. It seems that the issue is finally “*receiving the attention it deserves.*”³⁵

IRFBA’s engagement with independent experts, CSOs and interest groups has built a consensual approach of the defense of FoRB, whereby faith-based organizations among the CSOs respect the human rights framework and shared values, while still propagating their own views. This engagement entails a certain risk of tunnel vision, which no doubt also exists in other plurilateral alliances and coalitions, like the Media Freedom Coalition, the Freedom Online Coalition and the Equal Rights Coalition.

However, even if IRFBA shares this risk with other plurilateral alliances where governments work closely together with CSOs and interest groups, IRFBA’s relationship with the wider human rights environment might still continue to suffer from “mutual misunderstanding and bias entrenchment”³⁶ due to its populist beginning.

country was listed on the Watch List in 2018 and 2019 and struck from that list in 2020, determining that it no longer engaged in or tolerated “severe violations of religious freedom.”

35 Thames, Knox: The London Blueprint for Progress (3 Jul. 2022), <https://www.knoxthames.com/post/blueprint-for-progress>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023; italics by the author.

36 Knox: Maintaining International, p. 7.

