



UN Human Rights Council: 34th Session (February 27-March 24, 2016)
Item 3: ID with Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Speaker: Michael De Dora, Main Representative

Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief

Mr. President,

We applaud the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief for his first report to the Council, in which he sets forth a framework for his mandate “consistent with the growing emphasis” of the Council “to address persistent implementation gaps in compliance with human rights standards.”¹

States cannot meaningfully address implementation gaps without first recognizing the scope of the rights they are failing to protect. As the special rapporteur notes: “Individuals, not religions, convictions, belief systems or truth claims, are right-holders” — and these include the rights:

- “to possess and express their beliefs either individually or in community with others in order to shape their lives in conformity with their own convictions.”
- “to publicly manifest their religion or belief, alone or together with others, and the prerogative of deciding whether they wish to manifest their religious convictions.”
- “to replace [their] current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views.”²

Further, “this right prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or belief system.”

Regrettably, freedom of religion or belief is restricted around the world. Often state actors justify these restrictions in name of a particular religious doctrine. However, the special rapporteur rightly warns that restrictions may also exist when states “emphasize(s) state secularism over the right to freedom of religion or belief.” Either way, these states violate self-evident human rights.

In order to address these issues, we urge more robust engagement in the Istanbul Process, the series of events concerning application of resolution 16/18.³ While there have been legitimate criticisms of certain aspects of the Process⁴, it does provide a space for dialogue, consensus, and progress on freedom of religion or belief. We propose that through increased accountability and reporting, broader participation from states, and greater inclusion of civil society actors, the Process could achieve measurable results. Thank you.

¹ http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/34/50

² For all quotes, see section III, paragraphs 24-32.

³ <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38648/en/new-guide-on-implementing-un-hrc-resolution-16-18>

⁴ http://www.centerforinquiry.net/uploads/attachments/CFI_-_Saudi_Arabia_Istanbul_Process.pdf