

UNGA 78th Session Parallel Event

Strengthening Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion and Belief in Yemen



Strengthening Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion and Belief in Yemen

for Resilient Peace, Prosperity, Progress and Sustainability for All

Yemen is one of the most under reported places with among the worst religious freedom conditions. It is in the top 10 for Open Doors' WWL and US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Early Warning Project for mass atrocities.



Nadine Maenza

Nadine is the President of the IRF Secretariat, an international organization focused on building infrastructure to support the religious freedom movement globally, running the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable in Washington, DC and in over 30 countries globally. She also serves as a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center.

In May 2022, Nadine finished her second term as a White House appointee on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), serving her last year as Chair.

Dr. Nazila Ghanea

Dr. Nazila Ghanea holds the mandate of UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. She is Professor of International Human Rights Law and Director of the MSc in International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford. Her academic work has often connected with multilateral practice in international human rights law.

Vice Chair USCIRF, Commissioner Fred Davie

USCIRF Commissioner Fred Davie is Senior Strategic Advisor to the President at Union Theological Seminary, where he had served as Executive Vice President for a decade. He is completing his second term as a Commissioner of USCIRF and was appointed by the Majority Leader of the US Senate Charles Schumer.

Musheer

Musheer is a Christian convert pastor and former religious prisoner of conscience for four years in Yemen at the hands of Houthi authorities. He was released in February 2021.

Huda is a survivor of arbitrary detention and torture at the hands of Houthi rebels for her Christian faith. Authorities arrested her in April 2018 and only released her in June 2019

Shamaa is a survivor of arbitrary detention and torture at the hands of Houthi rebels for her Christian faith. Authorities arrested her in April 2018 and only released her in June 2019

Abdul Yafai

The son of two proud mountain villagers who emigrated to the US to escape poverty and starvation. Abdul was raised alternatingly between America and Yemen to make the most of a Western education while maintaining his heritage and language. He is now a successful Administrative Leader with accomplishments in Neuroscience and Organizational Development. He hopes to return to Yemen one day to aid in the country's healing when peace is restored.

Dr. Nader Al-Sakkaf

Dr. Al-Sakkaf is a member of the Office of Public Affairs of the Baha'is of Yemen. He represents the Yemen Baha'i community in its relationships with Officials, non-governmental organizations, the media, and the broader public. An Eye Specialist by profession he was also a former Prisoner of Belief, arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned twice by the Houthis in 2015 & 2016. Currently being tried in absentia for believing in the Baha'i faith.

[UNGA theme : Rebuilding Trust and Reigniting Global Solidarity: Accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals Towards Peace, Prosperity, Progress and Sustainability for All]

Strengthening Freedom of Thought Conscience, Religion and Belief in Yemen for Resilient Peace, Prosperity, Progress and Sustainability for All

Date: 11th September 2023

Time: 10:00-11:30AM

Room: Bahais International Office, 866 United Nations Plaza #120, New York, NY 10017

Title: *Strengthening Freedom of Thought Conscience, Religion and Belief in Yemen for Resilient Peace, Prosperity, Progress and Sustainability for All*

Sponsoring ECOSOC organisations:

Jubilee Campaign, Bahá'í International Community*

Co-sponsoring non-ECOSOC organisations:

Minority Council of Yemen, Set My People Free, Christian Freedom International, CAP freedom of conscience.

Summary:

Violence in Yemen in 2023 has seen an uptick¹, including an increase in targeted attacks and violent speech towards religious minorities. On 25th May 2023, Houthi militia stormed a peaceful meeting of Bahais in Sana'a and arrested 17, including five women, and continue to detain 11 of them incommunicado.² In 2 June 2023, the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights reported how the Mufti Shamseddin Sharafeddin, appointed by leaders of the Houthi militant movement, accused the detained Bahais of being apostates and saying "they should be killed," if they did not repent.³

Similar hate speech and incitement has been recorded in Yemen towards Christian converts and others since the start of the conflict and was raised during the virtual 53rd Human Rights Council parallel [event](#) co-sponsored by the Slovak Republic Bureau of the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. In addition, Article 259 of the Penal Code

¹ BBC News (April 2023). Yemen: Why is the war there getting more violent?. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

² Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (09 June 2023). Detention of followers of the minority Baha'i faith. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/06/detention-followers-minority-bahai-faith>.

³ Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (09 June 2023). Detention of followers of the minority Baha'i faith. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/06/detention-followers-minority-bahai-faith>.

in Yemen, provides that apostasy is punishable by death.⁴ There are an estimated 40 000 Christians both native and refugees from abroad, this number however, has dwindled, and USCIRF reports that the community has shrunk to only a few thousand, “Christians who remain in Yemen are unable to worship in public without fear.”⁵

Women

In addition, women are especially targeted in Houthi-controlled areas where restrictions of freedom of movement have become more pronounced with detrimental impact on several freedoms, including women’s exercise of freedom of religion and belief.⁶

Christian convert women have reported how Houthi security guards physically beat them while in detention, and one survivor shared about threats by the Houthis to marry off her teenage daughter to a chief Houthi leader as punishment for leaving Islam. She was able to escape with her daughter before the threats were acted on. The Muharram laws however, exacerbate the hardships faced by Yemeni women and hamper their ability to flee religious persecution and domestic violence.⁷

Humanitarian crisis

Yemen has a population of over 24 million people, with more than 80 per cent of the population struggling to access food, safe drinking water and adequate health services.⁸ It is therefore exceedingly concerning that aid is being denied several Yemenis because of their religion or belief, such as apostates from Islam in Yemen and others. These actions leave minorities additionally vulnerable, not only do they face the risk of extrajudicial execution for perceived or *de facto* apostasy or arbitrary detention, but also enforced hunger by intolerant actors who have weaponised aid distribution.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) describes in its Humanitarian Response Plan how existing legal and policy frameworks are weak and lack proper implementation to protect rights but does not include information regarding the systemic discrimination of individuals on religious grounds.⁹ The Humanitarian Response Plan does note how children continue to be exposed to “family

⁴ “It also contains various other offences similar to blasphemy see articles 194 195, 260, and 261 [of the Penal Code].”

Alexander, Christopher; Sato, Mai; Hosen, Nadirsyah; McLaren, James (2021). Killing in the Name of God: State-sanctioned Violations of Religious Freedom. Monash University. Report. <https://doi.org/10.26180/16748866.v2>

⁵ Miller, Hilary (May 2023). Religious Freedom in Houthi-Controlled Areas of Yemen. USCIRF. Report. [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023_Factsheet_Houthi_\(1\).pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023_Factsheet_Houthi_(1).pdf).

⁶ Miller, Hilary (May 2023). Religious Freedom in Houthi-Controlled Areas of Yemen. USCIRF. Report. [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023_Factsheet_Houthi_\(1\).pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023_Factsheet_Houthi_(1).pdf).

⁷ Miller, Hilary (May 2023). Religious Freedom in Houthi-Controlled Areas of Yemen. USCIRF. Report. [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023_Factsheet_Houthi_\(1\).pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023_Factsheet_Houthi_(1).pdf).

⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Yemen: 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan*, January 2023, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023-enar>.

⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Yemen: 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan*, January 2023, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023-enar>.

separation, child recruitment into armed groups, forced/early marriage, trafficking and the worst forms of child labour, such as commercial sexual exploitation". The report acknowledges marginalization and discrimination against certain minority and gender groups - but not with regards to distribution of aid. The report highlights specifically the ethnic minority group Muhamasheen who are represented in the Minority Council of Yemen, noting the social exclusion and reduced access to public services. These injustices are compounded by "intersecting identities", such as being displaced and/or women.¹⁰ In addition to racial/ethnic discrimination however, religious discrimination is unfortunately also prevalent in the country, with those who leave Islam being threatened to death and/or ostracised from the society as noted above; information regarding individuals from religious minority groups, including Christians or Bahais, therefore, should be part of any future response plan.

Objectives:

This side-event will discuss and propose long-term and short-term action items to work for the strengthening of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief in Yemen to work for resilient peace. As highlighted so eloquently by the Special Envoy of the Secretary General to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, "...we cannot afford to seek a seasonal peace. The parties need to make further, bold steps toward a peace that is sustainable & just [...] and guarantees equal citizenship for all Yemenis, regardless of gender, faith, background or race."

The discussion will aim to address and focus on the following:

- Increase awareness among all stakeholders, including UN Member States, relevant bodies of the United Nations system, United Nations specialized agencies, funds and programmes to the importance of promoting freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief for accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs for all.
- How to harness the engagement and commitment of several states during the urgent debate to combat religious hatred in the context of Yemen;
- How to garner support for training of journalists in reporting on and providing visibility of an inclusive and diverse Yemen;
- Build on ongoing launched initiatives in the UN to be implemented in the context of Yemen and for the rights of minorities;
- Encourage and urge states engaged in combating hate speech - to address the increasing incitement to violence against individuals in Yemen for exercising their religion and belief.
- State sponsorship for in-country and external programs to promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief.

Moderator: Nadine Maenza, former USCIRF Commissioner, President IRF Secretariat.

Speakers:

- USCIRF Commissioner Fred Davie

¹⁰ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (January 2023). Yemen: 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023-enar>.

- UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr. Nazila Ghanea (virtually)
- Musheer, Yemeni pastor survivor of arbitrary detention in Houthi-Controlled areas (virtually)
- Huda, survivor and member of the Council of Minorities Yemen
- Nader Al Sakkaf, Bahai Yemeni survivor (virtually)
- Abdul Yafai Speaker on behalf of secular Yemenis
- Shamaa Jewish Yemeni survivor

Additional speakers (depending on time)

- Ann Buwalda, Executive Director Jubilee Campaign
- Mme Diarra Dime-Labille, Head of the Legal and Human Rights Department of the French Mission

Questions [ongoing]:

- [To USCIRF Commissioner Davie] How do apostasy and anti-conversion laws in Yemen affect the right of Yemenis to determine their religion or belief, and how do they affect the situation of Christian converts specifically?
- [To USCIRF Commissioner Davie] How can we push the rights of minorities in the peace process and for reconciliation?
- [To all] In this humanitarian crisis why is it important to talk about freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief?
- [To survivors] What steps can and should be taken by states, journalists, civil society, respectively to address the hate speech toward minorities?

Speech: Mr. Mushir Al-Khalidi

I am Mushir al-Khalidi, the representative of the Yemeni Christian minority. As a Yemeni Christian, I was arrested and tortured with a number of my Christian colleagues and forced to leave Yemen under abhorrent incitement to enmity us on charges of apostasy and collaborating abroad, which are charges punishable by death. Yemeni law does not recognize the freedom of man to choose his religion. Representing your religion is a crime of contempt and blasphemy of the Islamic religion, and its penalty is imprisonment. Our problem as minorities in Yemen is that the state does not recognize our existence as a religious group and minority and considers that any religion other than Islam is an intruder into society and a plot targeting the state, religion and sovereignty, and must be confronted with force, even if bloodshed is required.

Since the Houthis took power in Yemen, religious minorities face systematic media incitement under the supervision of their leadership, whose speeches are not without reference to minorities as tools of soft war on religion and society, and Christians in Yemen have been subjected to a lot of pressure in all areas of life, including deprivation of education, employment and life. Family and the ability to practice religious rituals is at its highest level since the outbreak of war in 2015.

Christians also faced societal discrimination in distributing emergency humanitarian aid and health care in Yemen, neglecting families in Cairo, and depriving them of aid, government support, and university scholarships offered by the embassy because of the common view towards people who are different, especially towards women and the way they mistreat them.

As long as laws prohibit freedom of religion, the state will not provide any protection or support for minorities.

On March 21, 2021, we established the National Council for Minorities with the participation of the Baha'i and Jewish religious minorities and the black minority in Yemen as a lever to demand our rights in various internal and international directions. As the most important thing we aim for is to find a package of constitutional and legal amendments that guarantee freedom of religion and belief, equal citizenship, coexistence, and establishment of a civilian state that guarantees rights and freedoms and their protection, as this is one of the most important foundations for achieving sustainable peace. But we were faced with a number of obstacles, the most significant of which was the lack of response to us and not granting of official licenses by the internationally recognized government, through which we will be able to move officially and legally to achieve our goals.

Therefore, the international community must play a role in protecting minorities, helping to solve their problems and supporting them inside Yemen or the displaced outside, and obligating the legitimate government to protect the freedom of every Yemeni to choose his own religion and belief, and for religious and ethnic minorities to be involved in the various committees that will work to build the peace process in Yemen in the next stage, and the issue of freedom to choose religion is among the priorities of any agreements between the conflicting parties.

Our demands are not difficult for the international community if they are taken carefully and seriously, but for us as Christians, Bahais and Jews with our children and families it is

a great dream, and ensuring these rights is a major reason for achieving sustainable peace even among other beliefs and Yemeni society in general.
Thank you.

Woman's word: Mrs. Huda Obaid

While the pivotal role that girls and women occupy in the development of their societies and peoples has become evident in most countries of the world. Where they are the first educators for generations. They are partners in various fields of economic, social and cultural life; Their participation increases the productivity of peoples, contributes to progress and prosperity, and promotes peace and harmony, when they enjoy their full rights.

In Yemen the rights of religious minorities are still restricted and subject to disparagement, social contempt, distortion and violation, in addition to being subject to legal restrictions and strict procedures, with content discriminatory power imposed on members of these minorities. The suffering of the Yemeni minorities has increased under the Houthis' control of the de facto authority to the point where the reality of the minorities in Yemen has become a horrific tragedy, which magnified twofold the suffering of minority women.

In light of the campaigns of incitement to hatred of religious minorities launched by the Houthi authority through various media and the podiums of mosques and the cultural courses, radio and social media. These campaigns affect Yemeni minority women and girls, including spreading false rumours and fake accusations, which harm them in terms of their morals and their belonging to society.

The situation of Yemeni women is getting worse and worse, until they are living in the hell of discrimination, persecution, deprivation and oppression of the most basic rights.

This made us, as women of the Christian minority and other minorities, suffer doubly and unfairly from ostracism, imprisonment and torture inside Yemen, displacement and asylum outside Yemen, deprivation of education, work, participation in decision-making and development; our deliberate exclusion from any international aid, governmental, health and psychological support, especially since there are many refugee families which consist of a mother and children only, and there is no breadwinner for her, other than the mother who suffers from the difficulties of life on her own. She is exposed to humiliation, extortion and threats in the absence of the government and the lack of support and protection for them.

We at the National Council for Minorities in Yemen firmly believe that stopping the oppression of women and achieving full equality between the sexes is the most important demands for the peace that should prevail throughout our beloved country, Yemen. The participation of women, side by side with men, in all public affairs, including participation in peace negotiations and planning for the future, changing of laws and governmental leadership working with confidence and competence.

In addition to enabling them to reach high educational levels and equal opportunities which they are often deprived of. Women are able to make unique contributions to the creation of a just system characterized by dynamic, cooperation and harmony, and excels by a high degree of sympathy and humanity that Yemen has not enjoyed before.

We appeal and call on the international community and humanitarian organizations to pay attention and cooperate seriously with what the women and children of the Christian minority and other minorities face inside Yemen or in places of refuge in terms of all their human rights, and that their assistance and support be among the priorities of humanitarian and human rights work, and put pressure on the recognized government to adopt women of the Christian minority and other minorities inside Yemen And refugee women outside Yemen and provide them with support, protection, education and psychological care.

Thank you

The statement by the Jewish community,
Ladies and Gentlemen

We, the Jews of Yemen, are considered an essential part of the cultural component of Yemeni society, and we are considered among the first Yemenis who founded the Sabaean, Himyarite, Qatabanid and other kingdoms until Islam came and the history of persecution against the Yemeni Jews began, as we were present in different regions and skilled in different crafts, and with the passage of time and with the continuing waves of persecution and killing. With displacement, our numbers decreased to dozens scattered throughout the governorates, and in 2021 the last three families were displaced from inside Yemen with the promise of releasing prisoner Levi Marhabi, who was arrested ten years ago.

For years, he was subjected to the most severe types of torture, and his wife, whose fate we do not know, was taken away only because he was a Yemeni Jew.

Although historically it has been proven that we have not created any social conflict with others, we are still being persecuted, treated with discrimination and hatred, and incited against us in sermons, platforms, and speeches by the Houthi government. Considering our situation as Jews in countries of asylum, it is not much better than our situation was in Yemen, despite Our numbers do not exceed thirty people, but we suffer from poor health, social and psychological conditions. We are deprived of education because society does not accept us. We suffer from exclusion from governmental and international aid, and the lack of protection from the recognized government.

We call on the international community, through the National Council for Minorities, to find quick solutions to the situation of Jewish refugees in Egypt, and also to put pressure on the Houthi government to release the Jewish prisoner, Levi Marhabi, and we demand our rights to return to our country and the right to citizenship and equality for all Yemeni citizens.

Thank you

Yemen's Universal Periodic Review

UPR Freedom of religion or belief

2019 - Brazil to Yemen - **Supported:** Within the spirit of the Durban Review Conference, continue to make all efforts to adopt effective measures to prevent the recurrence of threats against religious minorities, including the Jewish and the Baha'i communities.

2019 - Norway to Yemen - **Supported:** Investigate promptly allegations of arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment, including against the Baha'i community and other victims of religious persecution, and ensure accountability in line with international standards

2019 - Portugal to Yemen - **Supported:** Actively promote and ensure that marginalized and vulnerable ethnic, religious or social groups are effectively and meaningfully involved in the national reconciliation process

2019 - Luxembourg to Yemen - **Supported:** Stop persecution of religious minorities, notably the Baha'i

2019 - Italy to Yemen - **Supported:** Intensify efforts to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and the rights of persons belonging to religious minorities

2019 - Hungary to Yemen - **Supported:** Ensure freedom of expression and religion and protect Christian minority groups against threats and acts of violence

2009 - Nigeria to Yemen - **Noted:** Ensure the freedom of persons to choose a religion or belief including the right to change one's current religion or belief.

UPR Death Penalty

2019 - Georgia to Yemen - **Noted:** Launch a review of the legal provisions on capital punishment

2019 - Montenegro to Yemen - **Noted:** Ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty

2019 - Hungary to Yemen - **Noted:** Become a party to the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, and in the meantime declare a moratorium on executions

2019 - Estonia to Yemen - **Noted:** Announce a moratorium on all executions and ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty

2019 - Czechia to Yemen - **Supported:** Impose a moratorium on the death penalty and ensure that the death penalty is not imposed on persons under the age of 18 at the time of the commission of the criminal offence.

2014 - Poland to Yemen - **Noted:** Adhere to the global trend against the capital punishment by establishing, as a first step, a moratorium on its use.

2014 - Montenegro to Yemen - **Noted:** Establish an official moratorium on the use of the death penalty

2014 - Lithuania to Yemen - **Noted:** Establish a moratorium on the use of the death penalty with a view to its abolition and, in the meantime, immediately stop imposing the death penalty on anyone under the age of 18

2014 - Czechia to Yemen - Noted: Impose a moratorium on the death penalty with a view to abolishing the capital punishment. Further with regards to numerous cases of juvenile offenders facing the death penalty

2014 - Slovenia to Yemen - **Supported:** Revise its death penalty legislation so that it complies with ICCPR and particularly to ensure that the death penalty does not apply to minors

2009 - Hungary to Yemen - Noted: Reduce significantly the use of the death penalty with a view to its complete abolition.

2009 - Hungary to Yemen - **Supported:** Review the use of the death penalty on minors and mentally disabled persons

Sustainable Development Goals



Sustainable Development Goals and Article 18

