



## **Cyberspace as a Means to Decrease Terrorism and Increase the Peace Index: The role of Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB)**

### **Youth perspectives from the EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain**

#### **Restricted call for participants**

#### **Highlights**

- This youth seminar, designed by youth for the youth, is part of a flagship project on Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) developed with the support of the EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain in the framework of the Enhanced EU-GCC Political Dialogue;
- This seminar explores the conclusions of a 1<sup>st</sup> conference which took place in Manama in May-June 2022 (see below);
- 40 participants (aged 20-35) from the EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain will discuss issues linked to cyberspace as a means to decrease terrorism and increase the peace index through the lenses of FoRB;
- The seminar will comprise of 2 main sessions: 1) young people discussing among themselves and reaching their own conclusions and recommendations and 2) young people discussing with policy and decision makers on how to use the opportunity of links between the youth of EU and Kingdom of Bahrain to make cyberspace a better place using the leverage of FoRB;
- Arrival in Brussels: 7/02 evening;  
Departure from Brussels: 09/02 afternoon;  
Flights and accommodation for 2 nights covered for participants not residing in Belgium;
- Your nomination by your organisation should be sent to [michael@bepurple.be](mailto:michael@bepurple.be) as soon as possible (latest: Saturday 28/02 12 PM), with a short note outlining why you wish to participate to this seminar and how you expect to contribute making it a success.
- Places are limited: we will work on 1<sup>st</sup> arrived - 1<sup>st</sup> served basis.

#### **Concept note**

Both the EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain have been founded on universal values such as justice and peace. Both have committed to respect and implement key legal frameworks: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights for the EU. Both documents promote fundamental human rights like freedom of religion and belief as well as freedom of expression. Sharing the same universal values for both stakeholders implies respect for human dignity, identity and integrity of people and communities.



In line with the conclusions of the dialogue on Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) – “Broadening the tent” (May 2022, Manama), the role of FoRB in increasing the peace index and decreasing terrorism, specifically in the area of cyberspace, has been selected, embedding a youth perspective as they are among the first concerned.

Since 2012 and the active use of the cyberspace by terrorist groups such as Daesh as recruitment, propaganda and communication tools, or by other state and non-state parties to thwart democratic processes as part of their power strategies on the international stage, or more recently as space for dissemination of various opinions aiming at polarizing societies, around the Covid-19 pandemics, the Internet and its infrastructures have had much deeper impact on our individual and collective lives than what was initially thought to be the case with conversations on Facebook and Twitter less than a decade ago. At a more immediate level, this reality can be perceived in increasing Antisemitism and Anti-Muslim hatred on the world scale.

In this complex and multilayered field, where freedom of speech is relatively broader than in many countries, religious discourses and identities are regularly abused to contribute to polarizing societies, for example by fueling closed identities (Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist...) through “self”-made preachers, politicians and activists who seek to reduce identities to a few identifiable tenets/items, specifically underlining what makes their own group different from, and superior to, others. Others are outwardly fanning on the flames of hatred using religious narratives, including through “covert” operations, i.e. claiming a specific identity to broadcast messages of hatred towards one’s own group, with the aim to nurture negative perceptions and hatred towards the group they’ve hijacked the identity in the first place. These examples show the complexity of cyberspace where discourses can be multilayered, thwarted, and falsely attributed to third parties, while their reach has the potential to be global, hitting unintended audiences that will interpret the messages according to their own references, sometimes with even more damaging effects. All these above are among the root causes of the violation of the rights of religious minorities “off line” as well as the push for their assimilation. Reversely, the difficulties around honest integration processes, or the populist strengthening of superior races are reflected in the cyberspace.

In the same lines, a number of religious leaders have been condemned for quoting out of context Scriptures whose language is perceived nowadays as hate speech towards specific communities. Due to the fact that sacred texts travel through time, cultures and geography and address audiences for which they were not intended in the first place, their content might happen to be considered as hate speech, or even be genuinely weaponized as such, in particular on social media, where contextualization is even more of an issue, through reels, short messages, etc. If the manipulation of Scriptures has always been dangerous, this is even more the case nowadays when anyone can become a broadcaster of discourses through their mobile phone.

To respond to these challenges, the EU adopted very strong policies and legal frameworks to preserve FoRB and freedom of speech and expression, as well as and guidance on freedom of



expression off/online<sup>1</sup> – including in the difficult context of the fight against terrorism where the balance between rights is even more delicate to handle. As far as the Kingdom of Bahrain is concerned, Foreign Minister Dr Abdullatif Al Zayani<sup>2</sup>, at the beginning of June 2022, has announced that the Kingdom is working on a new set of laws and regulations on combating hate speech, hate crime and all forms of intolerance and hatred which are preventing political, economic and trade developments for both dialogue partners.

In the seminar, we will explore, with the support of youth active in the areas of FoRB, both from the EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain, how youth contribute to make cyberspace a safer place and turn it further into a means to prevent terrorism and foster peace – specifically avoiding the abuses of FoRB that contribute to nurturing hatred and intolerance, which are the breeding ground for violence – verbal, psychological and physical. The seminar sessions will be inspired, among others, by the EEAS guide on FoRB, which recommends, among others, combatting Antisemitism and Anti-Muslim and Anti-Christian hatred.

The seminar will address issues such as, but not exclusively:

- The need for policies for further regulations of cyberspace;
- Building alliances across cultural and religious areas using FoRB to foster peace and deter violence, including terrorism;
- The role of youth in promoting a meaningful balance between freedom of speech and FoRB;
- Which policies would be needed at European/national level to foster youth engagement in cyberspace to promote FoRB as a tool to foster peace and deter violence?
- How to organize mutual learning, exchange of practices between EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain in these areas and assist to governments to combat various forms of religious hatred;
- What are the identified challenges and opportunities from youth perspective?

## Methodology

The content of the seminar is being developed collaboratively by a Youth Working Group composed of 6-8 young persons (18-35 y/o) from the diverse background, from the EU and the Kingdom of Bahrain. With the support of experts, they identify the most relevant issues to work with from their perspective, using this unique opportunity to dialogue with decision and policy makers as well as religious leaders to bring forward their recommendations. To that effect, they develop jointly the agenda and identify the themes of the different sessions as well as potential speakers and resource persons. By doing so, the seminar is as much a capacity building tool for

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/09\\_hr\\_guidelines\\_expression\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/09_hr_guidelines_expression_en.pdf) (30.10.2022)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.zawya.com/en/legal/regulations/bahrain-working-on-comprehensive-set-of-laws-to-combat-hate-speech-tsw0dy9k> (30.10.2022)



both EU and Bahraini youths involved in the project, while generating relevant content for policy makers, based on the direct involvement and voices of the first concerned.

The seminar is therefore grounded in solid perspectives and contribute to building a longer-term mutual commitment within the EU-GCC Dialogue, of which the current seminar is part and parcel.

## Draft Agenda

### Pre-session 1 (One week before, exact date tbc)

- Online training/briefing session: “How to dialogue with policy/decision makers?”
- Participants to visit: [www.getbadnews.com](http://www.getbadnews.com) to get familiarized, through online, science-based, gaming, to the issue of dissemination of fake news and disinformation.

### Pre-session 2

- Arrival in Brussels (07/02 evening)
- Ice breaking session « around waffles » (08/02 morning)
- Visit of the EP & worship places in Brussels (tbc)

### Session 1: Youth conversation (Wed 08/02 afternoon)

Timing	Topic
13:30	Welcome and short introduction by the Youth Working Group (Prep Team)
13:40	Welcoming words
13:55	Icebreaker and building a safe space for positive engagement from participants
14:15	Introduction to the World Café session (Prep Team)
15:30	Conversation Round 1: World Café topics include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Freedom of religion and freedom of expression and their limitations;</i></li> <li>- <i>Fostering media literacy and critical thinking to prevent/tackle extreme narratives in cyberspace;</i></li> <li>- <i>The Role of Leaders and Policy Makers in the Promotion of Cyber Peace and Religious Freedom;</i></li> <li>- <i>Understanding the context and collaborative design of new projects</i></li> </ul>
16:00	Coffee Break



16:30	Conversation Round 2: participants move in group to a second conversation table
18:00	Consolidation of recommendations and conclusions in mixed groups
18:40	End of the day
19:00	Networking/gala dinner

### Session 2: Conversation with policy/decision makers (Thu 09/02 morning)

Timing	Topic
09:00	Welcome of participants
09:30	Welcome words by
09:45	Introduction to the fishbowl methodology Topic: <i>How to make cyberspace a critical place to foster peace and prevent religiously motivated hatred: dialogue 1: The strategic issues: are there limits to FoRB? ***</i>  Persons in dialogue (tbc)
11:00	Break
11:20	Introduction to the fishbowl methodology Topic: <i>How to make cyberspace a critical place to foster peace and prevent religiously motivated hatred: dialogue 2: From theory to practice: fostering media literacy, critical thinking and the role of leaders and policy makers; ideas of concrete initiatives</i>  Persons in dialogue (tbc)
12:30	Wrap up, conclusions and next steps ( <i>Seminar participants</i> )
12:45	Farewell light lunch