



International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance

Terms of Reference

Final: 10/06/2021

The purpose of this document is to outline the structure and operations of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (hereinafter “IRFBA”) and complements the Declaration of Principles of the IRFBA.¹ The IRFBA was launched in Washington, D.C. on February 5, 2020 with 27 members.

This document reflects the shared understanding that the IRFBA should allow for strategic cooperation among Members and interested stakeholders with a view to ensuring promotion of respect for and protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as articulated in the Declaration of Principles.

These Terms of Reference are for the use of IRFBA participants and members of the public.

A. Objectives

The IRFBA is a voluntary network of states working together to promote respect for and protect freedom of religion or belief for all.

The objective of the IRFBA is to advance the right to freedom of religion or belief in both member and non-member states through common action or coordinated action among a subgroup of members, and in the spirit of partnership, cooperation and continual improvement. The IRFBA addresses persecution, violence and discrimination against persons on the basis of religion or belief. Advocating for the right to freedom of religion or belief for all individuals, which includes the freedom of thought and conscience, to hold any belief or none, to change religion or belief, and to manifest religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, in worship, observance, practice and teaching, is the guiding principle of the IRFBA. Action to promote respect for FoRB is based on the principle that human rights are universal, interdependent, interrelated and indivisible. The actions of members of the Alliance are intended to complement and build upon existing work to promote respect for FoRB within the UN and other competent multilateral and regional organizations.

¹ <https://www.state.gov/declaration-of-principles-for-the-international-religious-freedom-alliance/>

The IRFBA is intended to bring together senior government officials to discuss actions their nations can take together to promote protecting members of religious minority groups and combating persecution, violence, and discrimination based on religion or belief.

B. Structure

To encourage open input from governments, civil society, and related institutions the IRFBA consists of three types of participatory categories. The categories of state participation are “Members” and “Friends.” International organizations, institutions, individuals, or entities may participate as “Observers.” The criteria and joining process for each of these categories is annexed to these Terms of Reference.²

Within the leadership structure, the IRFBA “Chair” and two “Vice Chairs” within the “Steering Committee” (SC) represent the overall membership.

A Secretariat leads the logistical administration of the IRFBA, including the coordination of all IRFBA participants and related activities. “Working groups” or other subgroups therein may be formed by Members of the IRFBA in coordination with the Steering Committee and Chair to assist in the advancement of IRFBA initiatives and priorities.

The IRFBA intends to actively pursue non-governmental cooperation and input through a “Council of Experts” (CoE), in addition to other forms of input, such as “deep dive” information discussions.

Roles and expectations, defined:

Members

- 1) Members are the states that have joined the IRFBA and are represented by a national government official.
- 2) Members are invited to participate at Ministerial level during the annual Ministers’ Forum.
- 3) In plenary meetings—meetings of all IRFBA members—members help develop the agenda and propose initiatives for collective action among as broad a group of participants as possible, such as statements or events. Other Members can choose to join such initiatives on an opt-in basis. The IRFBA does not need to operate as a consensus group, since the IRFBA does not take action as a body.
- 4) Members discuss challenges to FoRB and share experiences, strategies, ideas and best practices on how to overcome them, both in Member and non-Member states. To encourage active Member participation:
 - a. A “Members Committee” (MC) is to serve as dedicated feedback mechanism or “voice” of Members of the IRFBA during plenary meetings of the IRFBA.

² Participation in the IRFBA does not infer IRFBA member recognition of state or entity sovereignty.

- b. The MC meets prior to the each IRFBA plenary meeting and committee membership rotates with each meeting.
- c. At each plenary meeting of the IRFBA, the MC will identify and encourage 10% of IRFBA membership to present administrative or religious freedom policy concerns of individual Members, or that of wider IRFBA membership.

Friends

1. Friends are states that have an interest in becoming a Member.
2. Friends can attend and participate in the Member plenary meetings.
3. States may hold IRFBA Friend status for one calendar year.
4. At the discretion of the IRFBA Chair, and in consultation with the SC, an extension of one or more additional consecutive calendar year(s) may be granted.

Observers

1. Observers are relevant organizations, institutions, individuals or entities that have expertise in advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief globally and that, upon invitation by the Chair, actively participate in events organized by the IRFBA.

Chair

1. The IRFBA and its functions therein, including the Secretariat, are led by a Chair.
2. Any IRFBA Member that wishes to serve as the next Chair is expected to inform the current Chair and the Informal Steering Committee of its intention in writing prior to the last IRFBA meeting of the calendar year.
3. In the event that more than one IRFBA Member expresses interest in serving as the next Chair, the Secretariat conducts a vote of all Members. A quorum representing 75% of IRFBA membership should be present. The Member that receives a simple majority of those voting becomes Chair.
 - a. In the event of a tie, additional rounds of voting by IRFBA membership are to be held until a winner is determined through simple majority of voting Members in first instance.
4. The Chair serves for a period of one year. The Chair is expected to:
 - a. lead all general (plenary) meetings of the IRFBA, SC and CoE;
 - i. the Chair is to convene Members of the IRFBA (plenary)—whether in person or virtual—no less than every 8 weeks of each calendar year;
 - b. represent the IRFBA externally, where applicable;
 - c. approve the agenda and topics for meetings;

- d. propose and managing program(s) of work;
 - e. manage the Secretariat;
 - f. galvanize awareness and support for IRFBA activities;
 - g. recruit new participants in the IRFBA and all subgroups therein per applicable procedures outlined within IRFBA Terms of Reference;
 - h. remove IRFBA participants per procedures outlined within IRFBA Membership Annex;
5. In the event that no IRFBA Member wishes to serve as the next Chair, the term of the sitting Chair may be renewed, in consultation with the membership, for one year.

Steering Committee (SC)

1. The SC serves as the IRFBA's oversight mechanism. SC leadership, complemented by Member-led initiatives, drives the activities of the IRFBA.
2. The SC includes at least the Chair, and (2) Vice Chairs, and as appropriate, the host of the next IRFBA Ministers' Forum (annual meeting of Foreign Ministers).
 - a. Vice Chairs are appointed by the incoming Chair for a period of one year in consultation with the membership.
 - b. Vice Chairs assume acting leadership of the IRFBA in the absence of a Chair.
 - c. Vice Chairs maintain appropriate levels of support and leadership over all IRFBA activities.
 - d. The host of the next IRFBA Ministers' Forum is invited to attend the SC meetings, as appropriate.

Council of Experts (CoE)

1. A Council of Experts (CoE), consisting of representatives of multilateral and civil society organizations and experts that are committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief and endorse the Declaration of Principles of the IRFBA, provides feedback for IRFBA collaboration and possible Member action. The CoE does not [need to] speak as an entity.
2. As valued partners, the subject matter expertise provided by members of the CoE represents a significant public input into the activity of the IRFBA.
3. CoE membership is reviewed on an annual and rolling basis, as appropriate.

Secretariat

1. The Secretariat provides administrative functions for the IRFBA, acting in the IRFBA's best interest by promoting transparency, longevity, and actionable implementation of IRFBA priorities.
2. The Secretariat provides the necessary administrative and logistical support to the Chair, and at the direction of the Chair and the SC.

3. The Secretariat reports to the Chair directly. Working under the Chair, expectations of the Secretariat include:
 - a. Developing, facilitating, and managing the sharing of information and documents by IRFBA Members and, as appropriate, other relevant stakeholders;
 - b. Assisting the Chair in planning and organizing an annual Ministers' Forum and other activities;
 - c. Communicating regularly with the Chair, and planning and organizing the necessary follow-up to meetings of the IRFBA and subgroups therein;
 - d. Assisting in agenda setting and selection of discussion topics for IRFBA meetings, including the facilitation and schedule of MC meetings for the year ahead;
 - e. Drafting, issuing and circulating statements of encouragement or concern for Members of the IRFBA;
 - f. Reviewing and circulating the reports of Member-led thematic initiatives;
 - g. Issuing invitations to non-Members and other stakeholders to participate in relevant meeting(s) of the IRFBA and subgroups therein;
 - h. Reporting annually on IRFBA activities and accomplishments to the public, to include updating and maintaining any website or social media communications related to the IRFBA.
4. The Secretariat functions are embedded within the United States Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom.

C. Stakeholder Relationships

1. The Alliance values the expertise and work of international organizations, relevant Special Rapporteurs, civil society organizations, practitioners, and other relevant stakeholders working to promote the freedom of religion or belief.
2. The IRFBA, including through the Chair and Secretariat, liaises with relevant stakeholders to promote complementarity and transparency. It seeks to support and promote global efforts in the field of international religious freedom in a credible and balanced manner.
3. Developing a close and mutually reinforcing relationship with relevant stakeholders is a priority for the IRFBA. To this end, the IRFBA, including its Chair and Secretariat, actively pursues cooperation with relevant actors from the UN system, civil society and existing regional, sub-regional and other multilateral bodies involved in the advancement of FoRB.

D. Working Methods

1. All IRFBA participants, including those Members leading thematic initiatives make every effort to operate by consensus, working in the spirit of trust, solidarity, and transparency.
2. A commitment by IRFBA participants to the principle that the IRFBA should complement existing work to promote FoRB within the UN and other competent multilateral and regional organizations.

3. A commitment by IRFBA participants to Member-led initiatives on an opt-in basis and information sharing as a guiding principle of the IRFBA's annual activities.
4. IRFBA Terms of Reference and the utility of the IRBA are to be evaluated no less than every 5 years and no more than every two years, to further develop IRFBA structure and procedures, as appropriate.
5. To extent practicable, activities of the IRFBA operate under Chatham House Rule.

E. Finances

1. Any financial contributions to the IRFBA are made on a voluntary basis.

Annex: IRFBA Membership Criteria