GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

HUMAN RIGHTS
DIALOGUE
INCLUSION
PEACEFUL SOCIETIES

POLICY AND LEGAL BRIEFING

Interfaith Dialogue as a Tool for Peaceful Coexistence, Social Cohesion and the Prevention of Religious Intolerance

International Frameworks,
Human Rights Standards
and Diplomatic Engagement



PEOPLE | RIGHTS | DIALOGUE | INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In increasingly diverse and interconnected societies, interfaith dialogue can play an important role in promoting peaceful coexistence, strengthening social cohesion and preventing religious intolerance. While religious and belief diversity can enrich societies, it may also become a source of misunderstanding, exclusion and tension when combined with discrimination, misinformation or political polarisation. Addressing these challenges requires sustained efforts to foster mutual understanding, respect and cooperation among individuals and communities of different religious and belief traditions.

Interfaith dialogue refers to structured and sustained engagement among people from different religious and belief backgrounds, aimed at building trust, addressing misconceptions and identifying common ground. It has become an increasingly prominent component of international efforts to prevent conflict, counter intolerance and support inclusive societies. When effectively implemented, dialogue can create opportunities for cooperation, facilitate the peaceful management of differences and contribute to the prevention of tensions before they escalate.

Over the past two decades, the United Nations and other international actors have increasingly incorporated dialogue-based approaches into broader agendas relating to peacebuilding, human rights, conflict prevention and inclusion. Initiatives such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, World Interfaith Harmony Week, Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, the Istanbul Process, the Faith for Rights framework and the Fez Plan of Action reflect growing recognition of the role that engagement, cooperation and prevention can play in addressing religious intolerance and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Dialogue, however, is not a substitute for human rights protection, accountability or the effective implementation of international standards. Its effectiveness depends on an enabling environment in which everyone can exercise their human rights without discrimination, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, freedom of expression, and the right to equal protection under the law. Meaningful dialogue must also be inclusive of religious minorities, dissenting voices and non-believers, and must not reinforce existing inequalities or restrict individual rights in the name of consensus.

Education, public participation and institutional cooperation are also essential to ensuring that dialogue produces lasting results. Educational initiatives can help challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudice, while the meaningful participation of religious and belief minorities in public institutions and decision-making processes helps ensure that dialogue reflects the diversity of society. Governments, international organisations and civil society therefore have a role to play in creating spaces for engagement, strengthening the capacity of dialogue facilitators and addressing the inequalities that can prevent some communities from participating on an equal footing.

For diplomatic engagement, an important distinction must also be maintained between protecting individuals from discrimination and violence and protecting religions or beliefs from criticism. International human rights law generally protects the right to question, debate and criticise religious ideas, while prohibiting advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Frameworks such as the Rabat Plan of Action can help assess when expression reaches this threshold.

As societies confront emerging challenges, including online hate speech, disinformation, attacks on religious sites and growing social fragmentation, effective interfaith dialogue requires inclusive participation, sustained political commitment and cooperation among governments, international organisations, civil society and religious and belief communities. For diplomats and policymakers, dialogue should therefore be understood as a practical instrument that complements legal and institutional safeguards, supports conflict prevention and strengthens social resilience. Its contribution ultimately depends on translating mutual understanding into concrete action, inclusive policies and effective measures to prevent and address intolerance.

WHY THIS ISSUE MATTERS TODAY

Religious and belief diversity is an enduring feature of human societies. In today's increasingly interconnected world, however, interactions among people of different religious and belief traditions occur more frequently and in more visible ways than ever before. Globalization, migration, urbanization and digital communication have expanded opportunities for exchange across religious and cultural boundaries, creating both new possibilities for cooperation and new sources of tension.

Although religion is often associated with identity, community and social belonging, religious and belief differences do not in themselves lead to conflict. Research and international practice increasingly demonstrate that violence and social fragmentation are more often linked to political exclusion, discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, governance failures and the instrumentalization of identity than to theological differences alone.[1] Nevertheless, religious identities can become powerful markers of inclusion and exclusion when embedded within broader political, social or economic grievances.

In recent years, many regions have witnessed increasing manifestations of religious intolerance and discrimination. Antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Christian hostility and discrimination affecting minority religious and belief communities (including, *inter alia*, Bahá'ís, Yazidis, Sikhs, and Jehovah's Witnesses) continue to be documented by international and regional human rights mechanisms.[2] Individuals who identify with minority faith traditions, have converted from one religion to another, or profess no religious belief may face particular vulnerabilities, including social exclusion, restrictions on participation in public life and, in some contexts, violence.[3]

Religion and belief are also increasingly present within broader debates concerning national identity, migration, security, education and social values. In some contexts, religious symbols, beliefs and practices have become focal points in polarized public debates, contributing to the perception that differences between communities are incompatible rather than manageable through democratic processes, and therefore creating dynamics that may erode trust, weaken social cohesion and create environments in which prejudice and discrimination become more likely.

The digital transformation of contemporary societies has added further complexity. Social media platforms and digital communication technologies have significantly expanded opportunities for encounter, learning and exchange among religious and belief communities. However, they have also facilitated the rapid dissemination of stereotypes, conspiracy theories, misinformation and hate speech. Online content can amplify existing divisions, reinforce prejudices and contribute to the normalization of exclusionary narratives.[4] Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, are likely to further shape how religious identities and intercommunal relations are represented and contested in public spaces.

These developments have reinforced the importance of preventive approaches that seek to build trust and strengthen resilience before tensions escalate. Within this context, interfaith dialogue has emerged as an increasingly important tool for fostering constructive engagement across religious and belief differences. By creating opportunities for encounter, dialogue can challenge stereotypes, encourage mutual understanding and promote relationships based on respect rather than suspicion. Such engagement can help reduce the social distance that often underlies prejudice and discrimination.

Interfaith dialogue is also increasingly recognized as a contributor to social cohesion and peacebuilding. Dialogue initiatives can create spaces in which communities jointly address shared challenges, identify common interests and develop cooperative responses to social problems. In contexts affected by tension

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[1] Pitt, R. N., Sharma, L. S., Belback, D. J., & Smith, S. R. (2025). The Social Fabric of Faith: The Interconnectedness of Community Influence and Authentic Religious Expression. *Review of Religious Research*, *67*(2), 231-256.

[2] Ghanea, N. (2024). *Hatred on the Basis of Religion or Belief*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, UN Doc. A/HRC/55/47; Shaheed, A. (2022). *Religious or Belief Minorities in Situations of Conflict and Insecurity*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/44.

[3] Scheitle, C. P., & Howard Ecklund, E. (2020). Individuals' Experiences with Religious Hostility, Discrimination, and Violence: Findings from a New National Survey. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *6*.

[4] Ramadhan, Jelang, Karomah Widianingsih, Eva Achjani Zulfa, and Imam Khomaeini Hayatullah. 2025. "*Media and Islamophobia in Europe: A Literature-Based Analysis of Reports 2015–2023*" *Religions* 16, no. 5: 584; European Observatory of Online Hate, *Monthly Report August 2025*.

or conflict, dialogue may support reconciliation efforts by rebuilding communication and trust among communities whose relationships have deteriorated.

The importance of interfaith dialogue has therefore expanded beyond traditional religious engagement. Today, it is increasingly viewed as a tool for prevention, inclusion and resilience. International organizations, governments, religious leaders and civil society actors have incorporated dialogue into broader strategies aimed at addressing intolerance, protecting diversity, strengthening democratic participation and promoting peaceful coexistence. And as societies become more diverse and the challenges associated with polarization become more complex, the ability to foster meaningful engagement across religious and belief differences is likely to remain an important component of efforts to build inclusive, stable and resilient societies.

THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC FRAMEWORK

Political and diplomatic initiatives focused on interfaith dialogue generally do not create legally binding obligations. Their purpose is instead to facilitate cooperation, support prevention efforts, strengthen mutual understanding and provide practical tools for addressing tensions linked to religion and belief. Together, they form a diverse ecosystem of intergovernmental processes, United Nations initiatives and partnerships with religious leaders and civil society actors.

A. Dialogue and Confidence-Building

At the international level, dialogue is increasingly recognized as a tool for building trust among communities, preventing misunderstandings and fostering cooperation across religious and cultural divides.

- The most prominent United Nations platform dedicated to this objective is the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). Established in 2005, UNAOC was conceived as a response to growing concerns about polarization, extremism and tensions associated with cultural and religious differences. It promotes dialogue through global forums, educational initiatives, youth engagement programmes and partnerships involving governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions and religious actors. As a United Nations Secretariat-led initiative, UNAOC functions primarily as a platform for confidence-building and intercultural understanding rather than as a norm-setting mechanism.
- A complementary initiative is World Interfaith Harmony Week, observed annually during the first week of February following its proclamation by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 65/5 (A/RES/65/5), adopted on 20 October 2010. The initiative encourages governments, religious communities, educational institutions and civil society organizations to organize activities that promote mutual understanding and cooperation among people of different faiths and beliefs. Its significance lies less in institutional implementation than in its symbolic and educational value as a global recognition of interfaith engagement.
- Interfaith dialogue has also been advanced through a variety of intercultural, educational and peacebuilding programmes implemented by UNESCO and other United Nations entities. These initiatives emphasize the role of education in reducing prejudice, strengthening respect for diversity and equipping individuals with the skills necessary for constructive engagement across differences. Within peacebuilding contexts, dialogue initiatives increasingly seek to create opportunities for communities to address shared concerns, rebuild trust and prevent the escalation of tensions.

B. Addressing Intolerance and Protecting Religious Sites

Alongside confidence-building efforts, the international community has developed a range of initiatives aimed at addressing religious intolerance and protecting communities particularly vulnerable to hatred and violence.

- A central framework in this regard is the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, launched by the Secretary-General in 2019. Unlike intergovernmental processes

negotiated by States, this initiative is led by the United Nations Secretariat and provides system-wide guidance for preventing and responding to hate speech. The strategy emphasizes that addressing hatred requires not only legal responses but also education, outreach, dialogue and engagement with religious leaders, civil society organizations and local communities.

- Similarly, the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites was developed following attacks against places of worship and religious heritage. The Plan recognizes that religious sites often hold profound spiritual, historical and social significance for communities and that attacks against such sites may exacerbate social divisions and fuel cycles of violence. It promotes preventive action, community engagement, interfaith cooperation and partnerships among governments, religious authorities and civil society actors.

These initiatives are complemented by resolutions and activities adopted through the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, which have increasingly emphasized the importance of combating religious intolerance while preserving human rights and fundamental freedoms.[5]

A distinguishing feature of these frameworks is their focus on practical responses to intolerance as they seek to translate principles of inclusion and mutual respect into concrete actions aimed at protecting communities and strengthening societal resilience.

C. Prevention and Cooperation

A third dimension of the international political framework focuses on prevention and implementation, with initiatives that seek to provide practical tools for addressing discrimination, reducing tensions and strengthening cooperation among relevant actors.

- A landmark development in this area was Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, adopted by *consensus* in 2011. The significance of the resolution lies in its shift away from earlier debates concerning the protection of religions from defamation towards a framework centred on protecting individuals from discrimination, hostility and violence. Resolution 16/18 encourages a range of practical measures, including education, awareness-raising, interfaith dialogue, community engagement and effective responses to incidents motivated by religious hatred.

- To support implementation of these commitments, Member States established the Istanbul Process (2011), an intergovernmental platform through which governments exchange experiences, identify good practices and discuss practical measures for implementing Resolution 16/18.

- A further contribution to this ecosystem is provided by the Beirut Declaration and the Faith for Rights framework, adopted in March 2017 by faith-based and civil society actors following an initiative led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Faith for Rights primarily engages religious leaders, faith-based organizations and civil society actors. The initiative seeks to build stronger connections between faith communities and international human rights standards while encouraging religious actors to become active partners in promoting dignity, equality and peaceful coexistence. Its practical toolkit translates human rights principles into concrete commitments that can be implemented at community level.

- The Fez Plan of Action, launched by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on 14 July 2017, serves a complementary purpose. Developed under the leadership of the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, it focuses specifically on the role of religious leaders in preventing incitement to violence and atrocity crimes. The Plan recognizes that religious leaders may play a critical role either in escalating tensions or in promoting restraint, dialogue and reconciliation,

[5] For further reference, see: UN General Assembly, Resolution 36/55, *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* (25 November 1981); UN General Assembly, Resolution 65/211, *Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* (21 December 2010); UN General Assembly, Resolution 75/187, on combating intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief (16 December 2020); and UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 53/1, *Countering Religious Hatred Constituting Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence* (12 July 2023).

therefore providing practical guidance on how faith actors can contribute to early warning, prevention and social resilience.

The contemporary international political framework recognizes that interfaith dialogue is most effective when supported by complementary forms of action. Confidence-building initiatives create spaces for encounter and understanding[6]; United Nations strategies address intolerance and strengthen protection mechanisms; and implementation frameworks provide practical tools for governments, religious leaders and civil society actors. While the growing number of international initiatives reflects the importance attached to interfaith dialogue, it also raises questions about potential overlap and duplication. Without effective coordination, parallel initiatives may dilute efforts rather than reinforce one another. Ensuring that they complement existing mechanisms, share good practices and respond to gaps in implementation is therefore essential to making international commitments more effective in practice.

THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Although interfaith dialogue is not itself established as a specific legal right under international law, it depends upon a broader legal framework that protects freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, freedom of expression, equality and non-discrimination, and the rights of minorities. These protections create the conditions necessary for individuals and communities to engage in dialogue freely and without fear of coercion, exclusion or violence.

The international legal framework has developed through a range of universal and regional instruments, most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965) and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948). These instruments collectively establish the legal foundations for pluralistic and inclusive societies in which dialogue can flourish.

A. Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief constitutes the cornerstone of the international legal framework governing religious diversity. Article 18 of the UDHR and Article 18 of the ICCPR recognize the right of every individual to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

International law protects the freedom to have, adopt or change a religion or belief of one's choice. This aspect of the right is absolute and may not be restricted under any circumstances. Individuals are free to embrace a religion, change their beliefs, adopt non-religious convictions or reject religion altogether. Importantly, the protection extends equally to theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs. International human rights law does not privilege any particular religion or belief system and protects believers and non-believers alike. The Human Rights Committee has emphasized that the right encompasses traditional religions, minority faiths, newly established movements and non-religious worldviews. The right also includes the freedom not to profess any religion or belief. Participation in religious activities, declarations of faith or religious identification cannot lawfully be compelled by the State.

Closely linked to this principle is freedom from coercion. International law prohibits measures that impair an individual's freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief, including coercive policies aimed at forcing conversion, preventing conversion or compelling adherence to a particular faith tradition. A central distinction within international law concerns the difference between the internal and external dimensions

[6] Examples include peer-to-peer capacity-building activities bringing together religious leaders and young media professionals, such as the Empowering Dialogue and Interfaith Networks (EDIN) project led by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism; interfaith learning and training activities developed under OHCHR's Faith for Rights framework; and community-level initiatives that bring people of different faiths and beliefs together to address shared concerns.

of the right. The internal dimension, often referred to as the *forum internum*, includes the freedom to hold, adopt, reject or change beliefs and is absolute. The external dimension, or *forum externum*, concerns the manifestation of those beliefs in practice and may be subject to limited restrictions under specific conditions established by international law.[7]

B. Manifestation of Religion or Belief

The right to freedom of religion or belief extends beyond private conviction and includes the freedom to manifest religion or belief individually or collectively, in public or in private. Manifestation may take many forms. It includes worship and religious ceremonies, observance of holy days and rituals, adherence to dietary practices, the wearing of religious dress and symbols, religious education, charitable activities and the establishment of religious institutions.

Teaching and proselytism may also fall within the scope of protected manifestations. International human rights bodies have generally recognized that the peaceful communication of religious beliefs is protected, while emphasizing that coercive or manipulative practices are incompatible with freedom of religion or belief.[8]

The protection of religious institutions is another important element. Communities must be able to establish places of worship, train religious leaders, organize collective activities and maintain institutions necessary for the exercise of their beliefs.

International practice has also recognized conscientious objection, particularly in relation to military service, as potentially deriving from freedom of thought, conscience and religion where objections are based on sincerely held convictions.[9]

Unlike the internal freedom to hold beliefs, manifestations of religion or belief may be subject to restrictions. Under Article 18(3) of the ICCPR, limitations are permitted only when they are prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, public order, public health, public morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Such restrictions must satisfy strict requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality. States bear the burden of demonstrating that any limitation is justified and that less restrictive alternatives would be insufficient.[10]

C. Equality and Non-Discrimination

Freedom of religion or belief cannot be understood in isolation from broader guarantees of equality and non-discrimination. Articles 2 and 26 of the ICCPR require States to ensure equal protection of the law and prohibit discrimination on grounds including religion.

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[7] See UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993), paras. 3 and 5. The Committee clarifies that freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief is protected unconditionally, while manifestations of religion or belief may be subject to the limitations specified in Article 18(3) of the ICCPR.

[8] See European Court of Human Rights, Kokkinakis v. Greece, Application No. 14307/88, Judgment of 25 May 1993, para. 31; and Larissis and Others v. Greece, Applications Nos. 23372/94, 26377/94 and 26378/94, Judgment of 24 February 1998, para. 45. The Court recognised that the freedom to manifest religion includes the right to communicate religious beliefs and seek to persuade others, while distinguishing this from improper proselytism involving the offer of material or social advantages or the application of improper pressure.

[9] See UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993), para. 11; and *Yoon and Choi v. Republic of Korea*, Communications Nos. 1321/2004 and 1322/2004, CCPR/C/88/D/1321-1322/2004 (2007).

[10] See UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993), para. 8. The Committee clarifies that restrictions on the manifestation of religion or belief must be strictly interpreted, directly related and proportionate to the specific need invoked. See also OHCHR, Reporting under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Training Guide, discussing the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality in assessing restrictions on Covenant rights.

The principle of equality is essential to meaningful dialogue. Interfaith engagement can only be genuinely inclusive when individuals and communities participate on an equal footing and without fear of exclusion or unequal treatment. Minority rights are particularly important in this respect. Article 27 of the ICCPR recognizes the rights of persons belonging to religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities to enjoy their culture, profess and practise their religion and use their language in community with others.

In practice, religious discrimination often intersects with other forms of exclusion. Religion may overlap with race, ethnicity, nationality, migration status, language or descent, producing complex patterns of vulnerability. Individuals belonging to minority religious communities may therefore experience multiple and reinforcing forms of discrimination.

This broader context also highlights the importance of economic, social and cultural rights. Exclusion from education, employment, housing, healthcare or public services may significantly affect the ability of communities to participate fully in society and in dialogue processes.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965) is particularly relevant where religious identities overlap with racial, ethnic, descent-based or national-origin identities. ICERD does not protect religion as an independent ground of discrimination. However, it may apply when hostility directed at a religious community is also linked to perceptions of race, ethnicity, ancestry or national origin, as is often the case in manifestations of antisemitism or anti-Muslim hatred or anti-Christian hostility targeting communities on these grounds.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child further reinforces these principles by recognizing children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14) while acknowledging the role of parents in providing guidance consistent with the child's evolving capacities (Article 5). It also emphasizes education directed towards respect for human rights, diversity and understanding among different groups (Article 29). These principles are particularly relevant for dialogue initiatives involving young people and educational institutions.

D. Freedom of Expression and Incitement

Interfaith dialogue depends upon the ability of individuals to exchange views openly, including views that may differ significantly from their own. Freedom of expression therefore occupies a central place within the legal framework. Article 19 of the ICCPR protects the right to hold opinions without interference and guarantees freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

The Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 34 (2011) emphasizes that freedom of expression protects not only popular or widely accepted views but also ideas that may be controversial, critical or disturbing. In pluralistic societies, disagreement about religious beliefs, practices and institutions is inevitable and, in many circumstances, legally protected.

At the same time, freedom of expression is not unlimited. Article 20(2) of the ICCPR requires States to prohibit advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

This distinction is critical. International human rights law generally protects criticism, debate, satire and disagreement concerning religions and beliefs. By contrast, expression that crosses the threshold into incitement against individuals or groups because of their religion may require legal intervention.

The Rabat Plan of Action (2012) provides important guidance for assessing such situations. Its six-part threshold test considers context, speaker, intent, content and form, extent of dissemination, and likelihood of harm when evaluating whether speech constitutes incitement.

E. Protection from Atrocity Crimes

The legal framework extends beyond the protection of individual rights and also addresses situations in which religious identity becomes a factor in serious international crimes.

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) recognizes religious groups as protected groups under international law and imposes obligations on States to prevent and punish genocide. The Convention reflects the recognition that religious communities may be targeted for destruction as such and that prevention requires action before violence reaches catastrophic levels.

International criminal law also recognizes persecution on religious grounds as a crime against humanity where it forms part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population.[11]

Contemporary approaches to atrocity prevention place increasing emphasis on early warning and prevention. Persistent discrimination, dehumanizing rhetoric, attacks on places of worship and sustained incitement against religious communities may all serve as indicators of escalating risk.

Religious sites and cultural heritage also receive protection under international humanitarian law during armed conflicts. Deliberate attacks against protected religious sites may constitute serious violations of international law and, in some circumstances, war crimes.[12]

For the purposes of interfaith dialogue, these protections underline the broader importance of prevention. Dialogue alone cannot prevent atrocity crimes, but it can contribute to strengthening trust, reducing polarization and fostering relationships that support resilience against violence and exclusion.

The international legal framework creates the conditions that allow interfaith dialogue to take place. By protecting freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, equality, minority rights and protection from discrimination and violence, international law provides the foundation upon which inclusive and meaningful engagement among religious and belief communities can be built. While dialogue itself remains a voluntary process, its success depends upon the effective implementation of these legal guarantees.

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS AND KEY TENSIONS

Interfaith dialogue takes place within societies where individuals and communities hold different beliefs, values and understandings of identity. While international human rights law provides a framework for managing diversity, tensions may arise concerning freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, equality, minority rights and participation in public life. These tensions often require balancing competing interests while ensuring equal protection and dignity for all. Understanding them is essential to ensuring that dialogue addresses questions of power, inclusion and discrimination rather than avoiding difficult issues.

A. Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression

One of the most debated issues in international human rights law concerns the relationship between freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. Both rights are fundamental to democratic and

[11] See Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), Article 7(1)(h), read together with Article 7(1) and Article 7(2)(g), which define the contextual requirements for crimes against humanity and persecution, respectively.

[12] See Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), Articles 8(2)(b)(ix) and 8(2)(e)(iv), concerning intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, provided they are not military objectives. See also the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, Article 4, which requires parties to respect cultural property and refrain from acts of hostility directed against it.

pluralistic societies. Freedom of religion or belief protects individuals in their ability to hold, adopt, change or reject religious beliefs. Freedom of expression protects the ability to seek, receive and impart ideas, including views about religion, belief systems and religious institutions.

International law generally protects individuals and communities from discrimination, hostility and violence because of their religion or belief. At the same time, it does not generally protect religions, beliefs or ideologies themselves from criticism, scrutiny, satire or disagreement. In pluralistic societies, religious teachings and practices, like political, philosophical or social ideas, may be debated, challenged and questioned.

The challenge lies in distinguishing between legitimate expression and conduct that contributes to discrimination or violence. Criticism of religious doctrines, leaders or institutions does not, in itself, constitute unlawful incitement. The 2015 attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* illustrates the stakes involved: the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad was followed by a terrorist attack that killed 12 people. The attack was unequivocally condemned by the United Nations, which stressed the importance of defending freedom of expression while resisting intolerance and reprisals against religious communities.[13]

For interfaith dialogue, this distinction is significant. Dialogue should encourage respectful engagement and mutual understanding, but it should not require participants to abandon disagreement or suppress legitimate criticism. The objective is not uniformity of belief, but peaceful engagement across differences.

B. Blasphemy and Apostasy Laws

Laws criminalizing blasphemy, religious offence or apostasy continue to generate significant human rights debate in various parts of the world. Supporters of such laws often argue that they protect religious values, social harmony or public order. Critics contend that they may be used to suppress dissent, restrict freedom of expression or limit freedom of religion or belief, particularly in situations where certain religious interpretations enjoy privileged legal or political status.

Such laws may disproportionately affect religious minorities, converts, dissenting members of religious communities and individuals who challenge established interpretations. Non-believers, atheists and agnostics may also face restrictions on expressing their views, while journalists, academics, artists and human rights defenders may encounter obstacles when addressing religious subjects.

These restrictions can have a chilling effect on dialogue, which depends on the ability to discuss beliefs and disagreements without fear of punishment or persecution. Although promoting respect is important, restrictions on expression must comply with international human rights standards, including legality, necessity and proportionality.

C. Equality Within Religious and Belief Communities

The promotion of freedom of religion or belief must also be considered alongside broader commitments to equality and non-discrimination. Tensions may arise when religious practices are invoked to justify barriers to the rights of women, children or other members of religious communities. International human

[13] For the UN response, see UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "Noon Briefing of 7 January 2015," which condemned the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* as an assault on freedom of expression and the media; and the Secretary-General's statement of 11 January 2015, which called for efforts to promote tolerance and understanding and warned against reprisals targeting Muslims. For the relevant legal standard, see the *Rabat Plan of Action* (A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, appendix), which clarifies that criticism or ridicule of religions is not, in itself, a basis for restricting expression and sets out a contextual test for determining when advocacy of religious hatred constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

rights standards affirm that religion and tradition cannot justify discrimination or violations of fundamental rights.

Women and girls may face restrictions on participation, leadership, education or personal autonomy in some contexts. Questions relating to gender equality, sexual orientation and gender identity can also generate debate within and among religious communities. Dialogue initiatives must provide space for differing perspectives while upholding the equal dignity and rights of all individuals.

Dialogue can facilitate these discussions, but it must not become a means of negotiating away human rights protections. Equal protection also extends to individuals within religious communities who hold minority or dissenting views. Recognizing diversity within communities is therefore as important as fostering understanding between them.

D. Religious Minorities and Intersectional Discrimination

Discrimination against religious minorities may intersect with ethnicity, race, nationality, language, migration status, caste or descent. These factors can overlap, making it difficult to separate religious prejudice from other forms of exclusion. For example, hostility towards a community may combine religious prejudice, racial stereotyping and discrimination based on national origin, while migrants belonging to minority faiths may face additional barriers to social participation and access to opportunities.

Political identity can further intersect with religion. In polarized environments, religious affiliation may become associated with particular political positions, national narratives or ideological movements, increasing the risk of exclusion and stigmatization. Effective dialogue must therefore consider the broader social and structural factors contributing to inequality and tension, rather than focusing exclusively on religious identity.

E. Education and Participation

Education plays a central role in shaping attitudes towards religious and belief diversity. Objective, balanced and inclusive education about religions and beliefs can help reduce stereotypes, foster critical thinking and encourage respect for diversity. By contrast, educational approaches that exclude, stigmatize or misrepresent particular communities may contribute to prejudice and social division.

International standards recognize the rights and responsibilities of parents to provide guidance regarding their children's upbringing while also emphasizing the evolving capacities of the child and the importance of education directed towards understanding, tolerance and respect for human rights.

Meaningful participation in public life is equally important. Religious and belief communities, particularly minorities, should have equal opportunities to participate in public institutions, political processes, public services and employment. Dialogue initiatives that exclude affected communities risk reproducing existing inequalities and overlooking important perspectives. Education and inclusive participation can help reduce prejudice, strengthen democratic engagement and create conditions for sustainable peaceful coexistence.

The human rights challenges associated with interfaith dialogue are therefore not simply conflicts between religion and secularism or between religious communities and freedom of expression. They concern the balancing of rights, the removal of inequalities and the protection of everyone's dignity. Dialogue can contribute to these objectives when grounded in inclusion, equality and universal human rights standards.

INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND DIALOGUE TOOLS

The international framework supporting interfaith dialogue, freedom of religion or belief and the prevention of religious intolerance is implemented through a diverse set of institutional mechanisms. On a diplomatic level, understanding how these mechanisms complement one another is often more important than understanding their individual institutional histories. Taken together, they provide avenues for monitoring developments, promoting dialogue, supporting prevention efforts and strengthening implementation of international commitments.

A. Monitoring and Interpretation

Several United Nations mechanisms contribute to the interpretation and monitoring of international standards relating to religion, belief, discrimination and minority rights.

- **Human Rights Committee**- It monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It reviews periodic reports submitted by States parties, adopts concluding observations and issues authoritative interpretations of Covenant provisions through General Comments. Of particular relevance are General Comment No. 22 on freedom of thought, conscience and religion and General Comment No. 34 on freedom of expression. These texts provide important guidance on issues frequently encountered in interfaith dialogue contexts, including conversion, religious diversity, freedom of expression and incitement. Where States have accepted the relevant procedure, the Committee may also receive individual communications. Its views are not legally binding in the same manner as court judgments, but they carry significant interpretative authority and frequently influence legislation, policy and judicial practice.
- **Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)**- CERD monitors implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Although religion is not protected as a separate ground under the Convention, the Committee frequently addresses situations where religious communities are targeted because religious identity overlaps with ethnicity, nationality, descent or race. The Committee reviews State reports, issues recommendations and, under certain procedures, may receive communications concerning alleged violations. Its work is particularly relevant for understanding intersectional forms of discrimination affecting religious minorities.
- **Committee on the Rights of the Child**- The Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It provides guidance on issues relating to religious education, parental guidance, children's evolving capacities and participation in public life. Its work is especially relevant for educational initiatives designed to promote dialogue, tolerance and understanding among different religious and belief communities.

B. Political Dialogue and Engagement Mechanisms

A second group of mechanisms focuses on political dialogue, peer learning and exchange among States and stakeholders.

- **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)** - The Universal Periodic Review is a peer-review mechanism through which all UN Member States periodically examine one another's human rights records. Issues frequently addressed through the UPR include freedom of religion or belief, discrimination, protection of minorities, religious intolerance and interfaith initiatives. Recommendations made through the process are not legally binding, but they often influence domestic policy reforms and provide opportunities for diplomatic engagement.
- **Human Rights Council and General Assembly Processes** - The Human Rights Council and the General Assembly serve as principal intergovernmental forums for discussing issues relating to religion, belief and diversity. Through resolutions, debates, panel discussions and thematic initiatives, these bodies contribute to norm development, agenda-setting and international cooperation. They also provide important opportunities for States, UN agencies, experts and civil society actors to exchange experiences and identify good practices.
- **Istanbul Process** - The Istanbul Process occupies a particular place within the international architecture. Established to support implementation of Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18,

it provides a practical platform for dialogue among States and stakeholders concerning measures to combat religious intolerance. The Istanbul Process facilitates exchanges of experience, identifying challenges and promoting practical responses to discrimination and hostility.

C. Early Warning and Prevention

Several mechanisms contribute to identifying and addressing risks before they escalate into violence.

- The UN **Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide** focuses on identifying risk factors associated with atrocity crimes and promoting preventive action. While not specifically mandated to address interfaith dialogue, the Office frequently examines issues such as discrimination, incitement, identity-based tensions and attacks against religious communities. It serves as an important source of early warning and analysis.
- The UN **Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief** plays a central role in monitoring developments affecting religious and belief communities worldwide. The mandate holder conducts country visits, communicates with governments, receives information from a wide range of stakeholders and submits thematic reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly. Although Special Rapporteurs do not issue binding decisions, their reports and recommendations often shape international discussions and provide valuable guidance for policymakers and practitioners.
- The UN **Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues** addresses challenges affecting ethnic, religious, linguistic and national minorities. The mandate is particularly relevant for dialogue initiatives involving minority communities and provides an important platform for highlighting exclusion, discrimination and barriers to participation.
- Because religious discrimination frequently intersects with race, ethnicity and national origin, the UN **Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism** contributes significantly to understanding the dynamics of intolerance affecting many religious communities.
- The **Forum on Minority Issues** provides a dedicated platform for dialogue among governments, experts, minority representatives and civil society organizations. Its thematic discussions generate recommendations that can inform national and international policies.

D. Capacity-Building, Education and Dialogue Facilitation

Another category of mechanisms focuses on strengthening knowledge, skills and cooperation.

- The **United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)** serves as the principal United Nations platform dedicated to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Its activities include global forums, youth programming, policy dialogue and partnerships with governments, educational institutions and civil society organizations. UNAOC does not monitor compliance with legal obligations; its primary role is confidence-building and facilitation of constructive engagement across communities.
- **UNESCO** promotes intercultural understanding through education, cultural heritage protection, research and capacity-building initiatives. Its programmes support educational reform, prevention of prejudice and the promotion of respect for diversity. UNESCO initiatives are policy and educational tools rather than legal enforcement mechanisms. Their value lies in influencing attitudes, knowledge and institutional practices.
- Developed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the **Faith for Rights framework** and its associated toolkit provide practical resources for religious leaders, educators, policymakers and civil society actors. The initiative seeks to connect faith-based engagement with international human rights standards and offers practical tools for dialogue, advocacy and community action.

E. Accountability and Remedy

While many dialogue initiatives are cooperative and voluntary, accountability mechanisms remain essential for addressing violations and ensuring protection of rights.

Treaty bodies may consider individual communications where States have accepted the relevant procedures. Regional mechanisms, including the European Court of Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the African human rights system, may also examine cases involving freedom of religion or belief, discrimination and minority rights.

Unlike political dialogue mechanisms, judicial and quasi-judicial institutions can provide authoritative findings concerning specific violations. Their decisions and interpretations contribute to the development of legal standards and, in some instances, may require corrective action by States.

These mechanisms underscore an important principle: dialogue and cooperation are most effective when accompanied by accountability and respect for international legal obligations.

JUDICIAL AND QUASI-JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENTS

Judicial and quasi-judicial bodies have played an important role in interpreting international standards relating to freedom of religion or belief, equality, freedom of expression and non-discrimination. Their decisions help clarify how these rights operate in practice and provide guidance for governments, international organizations and civil society actors.

Jurisprudence is significant not only because it resolves specific disputes but also because it illustrates broader principles relevant to managing religious diversity in pluralistic societies. The cases discussed below have been selected because they address recurring policy questions concerning conversion, religious manifestation, minority rights, religious offence, State neutrality and protection against discrimination.

The legal authority of these decisions varies. Judgments of regional courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) or the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, are binding upon the States concerned. By contrast, views adopted by the Human Rights Committee are not legally binding in the same manner as court judgments, although they carry considerable interpretative authority and have significantly influenced the development of international human rights law.

Table I. Selected Judicial and Quasi-Judicial Developments Relevant to Interfaith Dialogue and Freedom of Religion or Belief

Issue	Case	Legal Question	Principal Finding	Diplomatic and Policy Significance
Conversion and proselytism	Kokkinakis v. Greece (ECtHR, 1993)	Can restrictions on proselytism violate freedom of religion?	Freedom of religion includes the right to seek to convince others of one's beliefs. Peaceful proselytism is protected, although coercive forms may be restricted.	Established religious pluralism as a cornerstone of democratic society and remains a key reference for conversion and missionary activity.
Religious dress and manifestation of belief	Hudoyberganova v. Uzbekistan (HRC, 2004)	Can a student be excluded from university for wearing a headscarf?	Restrictions on religious dress must satisfy the tests of legality, necessity and proportionality under Article 18(3) ICCPR.	Illustrates protection of religious manifestation and remains relevant to contemporary debates on religious symbols in public institutions.

Equal treatment of religious communities	Waldman v. Canada (HRC, 1999)	Is public funding for only one religious school system discriminatory?	Differential treatment among religious communities requires objective and reasonable justification.	Highlights principles of equality, State neutrality and non-discrimination in public policy.
Religious offence and freedom of expression	Otto-Preminger-Institut v. Austria (ECtHR, 1994)	May States restrict expression offensive to religious believers?	The Court accepted restrictions in the specific circumstances of the case.	Illustrates the continuing debate over balancing freedom of expression and protection of religious sensitivities.
Conscientious objection	Yoon and Choi v. Republic of Korea (HRC, 2006)	Can conscientious objection to military service be protected under Article 18 ICCPR?	Deeply held religious or moral convictions may justify conscientious objection.	Demonstrates the broad scope of freedom of conscience beyond formal religious affiliation.
Protection of religious sites during armed conflict	The Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi (ICC, 2016)	Can deliberately attacking religious buildings and historic monuments during armed conflict constitute a war crime?	The International Criminal Court found Al Mahdi guilty of the war crime of intentionally directing attacks against religious and historic buildings in Timbuktu, Mali, that were not military objectives.	Demonstrates that international criminal law can protect religious sites during armed conflict and highlights the importance of safeguarding places of worship and cultural heritage.

Key Trends Emerging from the Jurisprudence

Several recurring principles emerge from international and regional jurisprudence. First, courts and treaty bodies consistently affirm the importance of religious pluralism and protection of minority beliefs. Second, restrictions on the manifestation of religion are subject to strict scrutiny and must satisfy requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality. Third, equality and non-discrimination remain central considerations in the relationship between States and religious communities. Finally, contemporary jurisprudence increasingly distinguishes between criticism of religions, which is generally protected, and advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FOR DIPLOMATS

The international framework on interfaith dialogue, freedom of religion or belief and the prevention of religious intolerance offers several practical lessons for diplomatic engagement. The following considerations may assist diplomats in negotiations, policy development, multilateral processes and preventive action.

- **Protect Individuals and Communities, Not Religions as Such:** International human rights law protects individuals and communities in the enjoyment of their rights and freedoms. While States may take measures to address discrimination, hostility and violence directed against persons because of their religion or belief, international law does not generally protect religions, doctrines or belief systems from criticism, disagreement or debate.

Diplomatic implication: In negotiations and resolutions, focus on protecting people from discrimination and violence rather than seeking special protection for religions or beliefs themselves.

- **Freedom of Religion or Belief Extends Beyond Participation in Recognized Religious Institutions:** Freedom of religion or belief protects the right to have, adopt, change or reject a religion or belief. It applies equally to members of majority religions, minority communities, converts, dissenting believers and non-believers.

Diplomatic implication: Ensure that national and international initiatives address the needs and rights of all religious and belief communities, including those that may not be formally recognized or socially dominant.

- **Restrictions on Religious Manifestation Must Meet Strict International Standards:** States may, under limited circumstances, restrict manifestations of religion or belief, but only where restrictions are prescribed by law and are necessary and proportionate to protect legitimate public interests or the rights of others.

Diplomatic implication: When assessing legislation, policies or international proposals concerning religious practices, consider whether restrictions satisfy the tests of legality, necessity and proportionality under international human rights law.

- **Offensive Expression Is Not Automatically Unlawful Incitement:** In pluralistic societies, criticism, satire and disagreement regarding religions and beliefs are generally protected forms of expression. Restrictions become justified only where expression reaches the threshold of incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

Diplomatic implication: Avoid conflating religious offence with incitement. Efforts to combat intolerance should remain consistent with freedom of expression and open public debate.

- **Use the Rabat Plan of Action as a Practical Tool:** The Rabat six-part threshold test provides a widely recognized framework for assessing whether particular forms of expression constitute prohibited incitement. By examining context, speaker, intent, content, extent of dissemination and likelihood of harm, it helps distinguish protected speech from unlawful advocacy of hatred.

Diplomatic implication: Reference the Rabat framework in discussions concerning hate speech, online content, incitement and prevention strategies. It offers a common language for balancing freedom of expression and protection from harm.

- **Interfaith Dialogue Is a Prevention Tool, Not a Substitute for Accountability:** Interfaith dialogue can strengthen trust, foster mutual understanding, reduce prejudice and contribute to conflict prevention. However, dialogue alone cannot remedy discrimination, address structural inequalities or replace legal protection, accountability and access to justice.

Diplomatic implication: Support dialogue initiatives as part of a broader strategy that also includes legal reform, institutional safeguards, human rights protection and effective remedies for victims.

- **Engage Religious Actors as Partners While Maintaining Inclusivity and Human Rights Consistency:** Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can make important contributions to prevention, peacebuilding, mediation and social cohesion. At the same time, dialogue initiatives should remain inclusive and ensure the meaningful participation of women, youth, minorities and non-believers.

Diplomatic implication: Maintain coherent policy positions across different diplomatic processes and avoid approaches that may inadvertently create conflicting standards or priorities.

- **Promote Coherence Across International Processes:** Issues relating to interfaith dialogue, freedom of religion or belief and religious intolerance are addressed across multiple international forums, including the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, UNESCO, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), the Universal Periodic Review and regional organizations.

Diplomatic implication: Engage faith actors as partners in prevention and dialogue efforts, while ensuring that participation remains broad, inclusive and consistent with universal human rights principles.

- **Ensure Equal Protection for All Communities:** Efforts to address religious hatred should protect all individuals and communities without establishing hierarchies of protection among religions or beliefs. Responses are most effective when they are grounded in principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality.

Diplomatic implication: Frame policies and diplomatic initiatives in inclusive terms that protect all persons, regardless of religion, belief, ethnicity, nationality or worldview.

EMERGING CHALLENGES

The international framework supporting interfaith dialogue continues to evolve in response to technological, political and social transformations. While existing legal and policy frameworks provide important foundations, several emerging issues are likely to shape future discussions within the United Nations, regional organizations and national policy processes. These challenges raise new questions concerning prevention, inclusion, freedom of expression and the protection of vulnerable communities.

A. Online Religious Hatred and Platform Accountability

Digital platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for intercultural and interreligious exchange, but they have also facilitated the rapid dissemination of religious hatred, conspiracy theories and discriminatory narratives targeting religious and belief communities. Online content can reach global audiences instantaneously, making harmful narratives more difficult to contain and address. A key challenge concerns the responsibilities of digital platforms and States in responding to harmful content while respecting freedom of expression. Questions remain regarding content moderation standards, transparency, accountability mechanisms and the appropriate balance between regulation and free expression.

Why diplomats should monitor it: Discussions regarding online hate speech increasingly intersect with human rights, digital governance and prevention policies. Future negotiations are likely to focus on how international standards apply within digital environments and on the responsibilities of both public and private actors.

B. Artificial Intelligence, Algorithmic Amplification and Deepfakes

Artificial intelligence (AI) is beginning to transform how information relating to religion and identity is created, disseminated and consumed. Algorithmic systems can amplify polarizing content, reinforce existing biases and accelerate the spread of misinformation. The emergence of synthetic media and deepfakes creates additional concerns. Fabricated audio, video or images targeting religious communities could contribute to social tensions, misinformation campaigns or incitement during periods of heightened sensitivity. These challenges were explicitly recognized in the 2024 Cascais Declaration, adopted at the Tenth Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, which highlighted both the potential of AI to support intercultural and interreligious dialogue and the need to address disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and information integrity in digital spaces.

Why diplomats should monitor it: International governance frameworks for AI remain under development. Decisions taken in coming years may significantly influence how digital technologies affect social cohesion, religious diversity and dialogue initiatives.

C. Disinformation Targeting Religious and Belief Communities

Disinformation campaigns increasingly exploit religious identities and social divisions to advance political, ideological or geopolitical objectives. Religious minorities may be particularly vulnerable to false narratives portraying them as threats to national security, public order or cultural identity. The cross-border nature of digital communications complicates existing regulatory approaches and creates uncertainty regarding the responsibilities of States, technology companies and international organizations.

Why diplomats should monitor it: Disinformation can undermine trust among communities, weaken social cohesion and complicate prevention efforts. Strengthening information integrity is becoming an increasingly important component of strategies promoting dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

D. Religious Nationalism, Political Polarization and Shrinking Civic Space

In many parts of the world, religion has become increasingly intertwined with debates concerning national identity, migration, citizenship and political belonging. Religious narratives may be used to support exclusionary visions of society or to reinforce political polarization. At the same time, some religious minorities, dissenting believers and non-believers continue to face restrictions on participation in public life, freedom of association and freedom of expression. These developments may reduce opportunities for meaningful engagement across communities and undermine the conditions necessary for dialogue. Important questions remain regarding how States can promote social cohesion while respecting pluralism and protecting minority rights.

Why diplomats should monitor it: Political polarization and restrictions on civic space can weaken both dialogue processes and broader prevention efforts. Maintaining inclusive participation will remain a significant challenge within many national and international contexts.

E. Blasphemy, Apostasy and Conversion Restrictions

Questions relating to blasphemy laws, apostasy provisions and restrictions on religious conversion continue to generate debate across international human rights forums. These issues raise difficult questions concerning freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, public order and religious identity. They may disproportionately affect religious minorities, converts, non-believers, journalists, academics and human rights defenders. Although international standards provide important guidance, significant differences remain among States concerning appropriate legal approaches.

Why diplomats should monitor it: These debates regularly arise within the Human Rights Council, the Universal Periodic Review and regional human rights mechanisms, and are likely to remain prominent in discussions relating to freedom of religion or belief and interfaith dialogue.

F. Religious Identity, Armed Conflict and Atrocity Prevention

Recent conflicts have demonstrated that religious identities may become entangled with broader political, ethnic, national or territorial disputes. Although religion is rarely the sole driver of violence, discriminatory rhetoric, attacks on places of worship and targeting of religious communities can contribute to escalating tensions. The protection of religious sites and cultural heritage has also become an increasingly important dimension of prevention efforts. Attacks on such sites can have profound symbolic effects that extend well beyond physical destruction. The challenge for policymakers is to strengthen early warning, prevention and resilience without reducing complex conflicts to purely religious explanations.

Why diplomats should monitor it: Prevention increasingly requires attention to discrimination, incitement and attacks against religious communities before violence escalates. Dialogue initiatives can contribute to resilience, but they must be integrated into broader prevention and protection strategies.

G. Ensuring Equal Attention to Different Forms of Religious Intolerance

International discussions have increasingly recognized the need to address antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Christian hostility and discrimination affecting other religious and belief communities. At the same time, concerns sometimes arise that different forms of intolerance receive unequal levels of visibility or political attention. The challenge is to respond effectively to specific manifestations of hatred while maintaining a universal and non-discriminatory approach.

Why diplomats should monitor it: Credible and sustainable responses require consistency. Policies aimed at addressing religious intolerance are likely to be most effective when they protect all persons and communities without creating hierarchies of concern or protection.

KEY REFERENCES

Table II. Reference Matrix

Category	Key Sources	Relevance to the Brief
Core Human Rights Instruments	UDHR (1948); ICCPR (1966); ICESCR (1966); ICERD (1965); CRC (1989); Genocide Convention (1948)	Establish the international legal framework governing freedom of religion or belief, equality, non-discrimination, children's rights and protection against atrocity crimes.
Standard-Setting Instruments	1981 Declaration on the Elimination of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief; 1992 Minorities Declaration	Elaborate standards concerning religious diversity, minority protection and freedom of religion or belief.
Authoritative Interpretations	HRC General Comment No. 22 (Article 18); HRC General Comment No. 34 (Article 19); CRC General Comment No. 20	Clarify the scope of freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and children's rights.
Human Rights Council and United Nations Policy Frameworks	HRC Resolution 16/18; HRC Resolution 55/14; HRC Resolution 53/1; Istanbul Process; UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech; UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites; World Interfaith Harmony Week	Provide the principal policy frameworks addressing religious intolerance, dialogue and prevention.
Interfaith Dialogue, Prevention and Faith-Based Framework	Rabat Plan of Action; Beirut Declaration; Faith for Rights Framework and Toolkit; Fez Plan of Action; Cascais Declaration (2024)	Promote dialogue-based approaches, prevention, education and cooperation among States, religious leaders and civil society actors.
Judicial and Quasi-Judicial Authorities	Kokkinakis v. Greece; Otto-Preminger-Institut v. Austria; Waldman v. Canada; Hudoyberganova v. Uzbekistan; Yoon and Choi v. Republic of Korea; Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro	Illustrate key principles concerning conversion, manifestation of religion, equality, freedom of expression, conscience and protection against atrocity crimes.
Institutional Reports	Reports of the Special Rapporteur on FoRB; Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues; Special Rapporteur on Racism; Secretary-General reports on Hate Speech and Religious Sites; UNAOC reports	Provide monitoring, policy guidance and thematic analysis.

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