

RELIGIOUS & INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN PEACEBUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

SUMMARY REPORT

Policy Dialogue, 3-4 June 2024

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME - ROME





THE RELIGION & FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX
ENGAGES IN RESEARCH PROJECTS AND POLICY DIALOGUE OFFERING THE LATEST THINKING
AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON RELIGION WITHIN INTERNATIONAL POLICY



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THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME ROME AND
THE NOTRE DAME KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS
HOST THE ROME SUMMER SEMINARS ON RELIGION AND GLOBAL POLITICS, AN
ANNUAL SUMMER SCHOOL FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS WORKING AT THE
CROSSROADS OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

On June 3-4 2024 the annual edition of the Policy Dialogues on Religions and International Relations supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC) took place in Rome with the title “*Religious and Interreligious Engagement in Peacebuilding in the Middle Eastern Crisis*”.¹ The dialogue, which was held as a closed-door roundtable format under Chatham House rules, included scholars, religious leaders, civil society actors and policymakers from across the region, including from Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, many of whom with decades of work in leading initiatives for peace and interreligious dialogue in the region. There were also representatives of the American, French, Italian, British, and Czech governments and other international organisations. The composition of the dialogues also reflected its setting in Rome and included the participation of actors working in the transnational religious and diplomatic networks linked to the Holy See.

The Policy Dialogue was convened in the context of the devastating escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine since October 7th and the further instability it had provoked in neighbouring countries such as in Syria and Lebanon. Since then the recent ceasefires in Lebanon and Gaza, however fragile,

¹ This policy dialogue has been co-organized by the RELIGION AND FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVE (RFPI) - UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX; the RESEARCH CENTRE ON RELIGION, LAW AND ECONOMY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA (REDESM) - UNIVERSITY OF INSUBRIA; and THE KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS - UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME; in collaboration with the ITALIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION (MFAIC); and in partnership with the second edition of the Rome Summer Seminars on Religion and Global Politics. The Italian Initiative on “Religions and International Relations” was launched in 2009 by the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian MFAIC with the aim to discuss the growing role of religion in international affairs by gathering scholars of religions and international relations, diplomats and policy makers, media actors and religious representatives, as well as movements and associations active in inter-religious dialogue. The Summary Report has been edited by Fabio Petito, Michael Driessen and Alessandro Ferrari, with the contributions of a number of the graduate students from the Rome Summer Seminars who were selected as rapporteurs for each panel of the workshop (see list on p. 17).

and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria have changed the context and the relevance of this Report which focused on what religious actors can bring to the table as partners in peacebuilding in the Middle East crisis.

As these conflicts enter into this new phase, the Report offers a series of initial reflections and recommendations on what role religious actors can play in partnership with governments to further de-escalate violence and build peace in the context of the ongoing diplomatic efforts. The report also illustrates important disagreements about how religious actors may or may not work towards peace in the region.

In continuing a dialogue of this kind, involving opposing voices and perspectives, it is our hope that even after these tragic events in the region, and in the face of the instrumental use of religious traditions, religious leaders can still unmask abusive interpretations; mobilize non-violent civil society action; facilitate conflict mediation; challenge political and social injustices; and accompany post-conflict reconciliation processes. Some policy-makers across the world recognize that religion and religious engagement of this sort can be “part of the solution” and a strategic resource for diplomacy and peacebuilding. As the recommendations in this report make clear, religious leaders or interreligious dialogue will not solve this political conflict. Nonetheless, we offer this Report as a contribution to the discussion of how religious engagement might better serve an inclusive and successful process of peacebuilding for the future of the region.

Fabio Petito, Michael Driessen & Alessandro Ferrari, 7 February 2025

Aims and Questions

In many ways, the aims of this Policy Dialogue were designed to build on the lessons drawn from the previous Policy Dialogues on Religions and International Relations. Over the last decade, successive workshops had explored the investment of states, policymakers, religious and interreligious leaders and civil society actors in new forms of interreligious engagement across the broader Mediterranean and Middle East. These initiatives were never complete, nor lacking in reasonable critique, but they produced unexpected breakthroughs, like the 2019 Document on Human Fraternity co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, and built a consortium of actors dedicated to their success. Many saw these overall efforts as offering both hope and innovative action.

At the same time, however, the devastating escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine, and the further instability it had provoked across the region, had changed the content of these efforts and severely tested its vision and modalities of action.

Within the broader horizon of exploring and advancing ideas on how political stability, conflict resolution and peace building could be strengthened in the context of the current Middle Eastern crisis via a deeper engagement with religion and religious communities, and recognizing these new realities, the Policy Dialogue articulated the following aims:

- 1) to understand the changing dynamics of religious and interreligious engagement in the region;
- 2) to facilitate religious and interreligious voices for peace and justice;
- 3) to identify possibilities for positive policy partnerships in this new context.

Thus, the policy dialogue's guiding questions included:

- How can religious leaders and communities help governmental and non-governmental organizations to de-escalate violence and build peace in the context of the current Middle Eastern crises?

- To what extent can interreligious dialogue and engagement be a realistic tool to construct peace, justice and reconciliation in the Middle East?

Four panels framed the roundtable discussions:

- I. THE FIRST PANEL WAS DESIGNED TO SET THE CONTEXT FOR RECENT RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT AND PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST
- II. THE SECOND PANEL SOUGHT TO TAKE STOCK OF HOW RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND ADVOCATES FOR PEACE WERE RESPONDING TO THE CURRENT CONFLICT
- III. THE THIRD PANEL TURNED TO THE RECENT EFFORTS AT INTERRELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT TO EXPLORE COUNTERNARRATIVES OF PEACE AND JUSTICE
- IV. THE FINAL PANEL LOOKED AT STRATEGIES OF ACTION BY RELIGIOUS ACTORS TO DE-ESCALATE VIOLENCE AND BUILD PEACE

The roundtable conversations throughout the panels highlighted important disagreements about religious engagement and the role of interreligious peacebuilding in the current situation. Dissonant voices were heard about the nature of the conflict, the role of interreligious engagement, and the policy priorities and even the desirability of various religious peacebuilding efforts in the region. Nevertheless, a number of proposals were made throughout the dialogue which suggested policy opportunities for religious and interreligious actors seeking to advocate for justice and work for peace.

Common Themes and Dissonances

In what follows, each section offers a snapshot of the four panel discussions and some of the policy recommendations which were expressed by different speakers in them. Some general recommendations as well as lines of disagreement that emerged from the panels included:

1) BUILDING RELIGIOUS COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Across a number of panels, participants remarked on the need for religious counter-narratives to challenge militant and exclusivist

religious framings of the conflict. In doing so, a number of participants urged policy-makers to recognize the religious dimension of the conflict and, simultaneously, to not reduce it to a religious conflict. Participants also recognized that realistic efforts aimed at stopping the violence, achieving a ceasefire, and working towards conflict resolution would also require political will, political institutions and international support.

2) HUMANITARIAN AID AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A number of participants saw the intensity of violence as creating a first-priority need for active interreligious investment in Humanitarian Aid efforts. Religious actors and communities who served as “humanitarians”, and who genuinely responded to the immediate needs of those who were suffering, were seen to be a key to any religious response to the conflict. This recommendation was often linked to calls for religious leaders and communities to be more consistent and forceful in their defense of the sanctity of all human lives and the universal application of human rights and social justice.

3) MULTI-RELIGIOUS AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS ACTION FOR PEACE

Some participants noted the absence or paucity of multi-religious statements calling for a ceasefire, for peace, and for the restoration of justice. Some saw this as an opportunity for international consortia of interreligious actors and organizations to craft such a statement. Others saw this as an opportunity for national interfaith platforms to do so. Others, still, saw this as a necessary effort for intra-religious dialogue initiatives.

4) CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY AND JUST PEACE

A number of calls were made for interreligious actors to adopt contextualized theological responses to the conflict, through the promotion of “critical religious literacy”, educational reforms and forceful advocacy for a Just Peace in the region. The exact meaning of contextual theology and a just peace differed among participants and reflected the diverse frameworks they had adopted to interpret the conflict.

5) INTERRELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

Some participants offered analyses charting out the change and complexity of interreligious efforts in the region over the last two decades and the new challenges that the current war created for the broader interreligious movement. Some questioned whether dialogue was still possible after the events of October 7th. Others called for the need for a new phase of “costly dialogue”, advocating for peace and resistance even in the threat of arrest and prosecution. Others remarked how the conflict revealed that interreligious dialogue could advance and stumble in different directions at the same time and that it was important to adopt more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approaches to models of interreligious peacemaking.

6) DIALOGUE FOR LIFE AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Finally, a number of participants emphasized the importance of continued efforts at sharing life together and making room for the other in the everyday practices and prayers of religious communities. Some participants spoke about the role of interreligious spirituality and dialogue for life and the need for interreligious dialogue initiatives to offer hope to others, and especially the youth, through their love for one another and their love for God.

1. SETTING THE CONTEXT: RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN PEACEBUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Religious nationalism, sectarian violence, polarization and increasing use of religious discourses by politicians and actors involved in conflicts in the region seem all to be part of the context of the current crisis. How can we better understand the religion-politics nexus in this context? What are the challenges of this new predicament for religious leaders and policymakers, respectively? In this new global context of crises, are there also new opportunities for religious leaders and communities to help governmental and international organisations de-escalate violence and build peace? What can be done?

The initial two-hour session established the foundation for the plenary discussions. The moderator began by drawing attention to the conflict in Syria, one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century.

Key challenges highlighted for the international community included how to manage its relationship with Syrian President Bashar Assad; how to reconcile truth and justice in a context where truth is elusive; and how to limit geopolitical interference to find a “Syrian solution”. The discussion shifted to the ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine and the war in Gaza, with agreement on religion’s role, but with differing views on the extent of its influence.

Some lamented that the conflict in Israel-Palestine had become “religion-ized” over time and mischaracterized as a “religious conflict” when it was and remained a conflict about self-determination and sovereignty. Others thought religion had been increasingly instrumentalized in the conflict, leading to a zero-sum game where mutually exclusive religious positions were juxtaposed against each other, hindering the search for a common solution. One person asserted that religion was overemphasized and that a more political and institutional response to the conflict was needed; another criticized the notion of distinguishing between “politics” and “religion”.

The entanglement of religion and politics was further illustrated through various examples, including the PLO’s secular narratives versus Hamas’ Islamist framing, and Netanyahu’s recent use of the Torah to defend his policies.

Lastly, someone remarked that prior agreements, such as the Abraham Accords, had failed to recognize the ‘sacred value’ of places like the Al Aqsa Mosque for conflict parties.

Secular actors’ skepticism towards religious engagement was another point of discussion, attributed to beliefs that interreligious engagement has no impact, that secularization would replace religion, and that religious peacebuilding takes too long. There was mention of the lack of religious literacy among secular actors and the difficulty in finding reliable religious partners. Despite these challenges, the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue in conflict transformation was emphasized, with examples such as the Catholic Church’s role in a Cuban hostage exchange and the recent peace process in Colombia.

Concerns were raised about the unclear international call for religious involvement, with one speaker pointing out the need to distinguish between inter-religious and multi-religious actions and the crucial role of local religious leaders in peace processes.

Attendees also problematized the engagement of only, or mostly, official religious leaders in dialogue initiatives, pointing out that the engagement of broader categories of more diverse and informal religious actors and leaders, including women and youth, would be more inclusive, representative and effective.

Further, the challenge of achieving a unified voice for peace among diverse religious actors was accentuated: one speaker noted the absence of interreligious statements at the national level regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. The lack of understanding as to why the broader global religious community has not taken a stance on the conflict was also highlighted.

Several panelists also problematized the role of extremism and how to engage extremist religious actors in the conflict. One participant argued that to exclude, *a priori*, extremist actors from mediation initiatives was to be condemned to a negative peace, and that religious actors who are deeply motivated by questions of justice will not be satisfied with bread alone or other merely material solutions.

Another participant argued that interreligious dialogue should not be viewed as a weakness or a form of appeasement but rather a radical position and commitment which necessitated new “extremists for dialogue”.

Several attendees also underlined the importance of involving civil society, along with efforts for reciprocal interreligious understanding. It was stressed that understanding does not equate to acceptance but is a necessary step towards it. The involvement of civil society also raised questions about civic and social debates surrounding major conflict issues.

Such debates necessitate careful consideration of the words and language used to describe the context, which are often perceived as non-neutral by the parties involved. Paying attention to language means being mindful of the deep cultural, psychological and anthropological dimensions related to conflict. This sensitivity can be particularly valuable when considering the perspectives of religiously oriented actors, as they can help to reveal the unspoken yet significant implications present in public discourse.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ENGAGE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION** As one participant put it, humanitarians are the keys to the peace. Humanitarian Aid efforts, it was recommended, could generate credible witness and trust that would enable religious and interreligious actors to engage in broader peacebuilding efforts
- **ENHANCE RELIGIOUS LITERACY** Educate secular actors to improve their understanding of religious dynamics and the role of religious actors in peacebuilding
- **INCORPORATE DIVERSE RELIGIOUS VOICES IN PEACE EFFORTS** Ensure peacebuilding efforts include a broad spectrum of religious actors, including women and youth, and consider the perspectives of both “moderate” and “extreme” actors

2. ENHANCING THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS IN PEACE MEDIATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

How are religious actors and advocates for peace responding to the conflict? What resources might religious actors draw upon? Are there innovative religious voices for peace that might be heard? Should authentic religious voices for Peace also be voices for Justice and Reconciliation? Are there ways that the narrative could/should be changed in this light? What is possible in this current context? What are the internal challenges within religious communities that an interreligious dialogue perspective raises?

The second panel raised questions about interreligious engagement efforts, the broader concept of dialogue, and the role that power dynamics play in legitimizing some religious and political actors over others.

Participants explored the problem of selective humanitarian aid based on religious identities, the instrumentalization of religious leaders' influence and credibility for self-interest, and the use of religious texts to justify violence, war, and occupation in Gaza, what some participants defined as an ongoing genocide.

Various speakers made strong appeals about the universality of human rights, the universal message of religious values about the sanctity of human life and the necessity of religious actors to consistently advocate for both.

Others urged interreligious actors to provide leadership in the region and to channel what one speaker described as the deeper, prevailing desires for peace within society, in both Israel and Palestine and across the region as well.

The question of justice and a just peace were forefront in the remarks of various speakers in the panel. Various speakers also emphasized the need for more critical and balanced framings of the conflict which did not fall prey to simplistic and stereotyped versions of it. At the same time, there was dissonance over what such a balance looked like and what criticism was missing from popularized framings of the conflict.

For some this meant adopting an approach that could simultaneously oppose the Israeli invasion of Gaza, stand in solidarity with the Palestinian community and condemn the actions and vision of Hamas while working to create sovereignty in Palestine and Israel.

For others it meant engaging in a hermeneutical challenging and “a painful unlearning” of religious narratives of Jewish supremacy and Zionism which had legitimized settler colonial policies of occupation in Palestine.

Some speakers addressed the selective application of legal principles by religious actors.

Others worried about the reduction of the religious to an affirmation of identity and its corrosive effect on religious institutions. Various speakers raised concerns about anti-Muslim hatred, racism, anti-Semitism, and the tolerance of right-wing extremism in Europe which they saw as posing significant threats to cooperation between actors today.

Speakers decried what they saw as the hypocrisy of European and American policymakers as well as the complicity and “utter impotence”, as one speaker phrased it, of international institutions and actors in their response to the conflict.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **THE NEED FOR BROADER FORMS OF INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE**
Religious organizations led by young people and women should be included and

empowered in interreligious dialogue and peace mediation processes, and religious and civil society organizations should collaborate with diverse actors

- **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION** within and between these organizations should be strengthened through multi-religious cooperation, capacity-training tools, especially for religious leaders engaging in the public sphere, and initiatives to overcome the militarization of religious leaders and language
- **RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND LEADERS SHOULD ENGAGE WITH THEOLOGIANS AND CIVIL SOCIETY TO BUILD THEOLOGICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES** to the militarization of religious leaders and language. They should also engage in humanitarian aid activity, and empower youth peace mediation through more inclusive interfaith initiatives
- **THE NEED TO ADOPT A NEW PHASE OF “COSTLY DIALOGUE”**, one which was animated by a deep commitment to social justice rather than international donor goals and resistant to the reproduction of colonial practices and institutions
- **THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK SHOULD BE STRENGTHENED** by consistent advocacy for the universality of human rights, social justice, and the rule of law

3. INTERRELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY AS A COUNTER-NARRATIVE TO BUILD PEACE?

What can be learned from the recent work of interreligious engagement for the current crisis in the Middle East? How can interreligious leaders contribute to peacebuilding efforts in the region today? Do recent interreligious efforts and coalitions offer resources and ideas for religious leaders and policymakers in this new context? Does the growing interreligious movement, as diverse as it is, offer a genuine alternative to narratives of religious nationalism, sectarianism and polarization? What are the connections between the current discourses on interreligious dialogue and political attempts to build societies that respect human dignity? Is it possible to amplify the peacebuilding impact of these novel interreligious dynamics? In what ways might interreligious efforts need to change as a response to the current conflict?

The third panel underscored the importance of interreligious diplomacy in the MENA region, emphasizing the need for culturally nuanced peacebuilding, the strategic engagement of religious leaders, and sustained, inclusive diplomatic efforts.

Practical steps that were discussed in this session included fostering trust through interfaith dialogues, addressing immediate humanitarian needs,

supporting socio-cultural initiatives and ensuring that international mediation plays a more effective role. Panelists also recognized the challenges posed by divisions within religious communities, global-local dynamics, and the lack of credible institutions. Thus, the importance role of religious leaders in effective peacebuilding was highlighted.

At the same time, the discussions also addressed issues of representativity and the reliability of religious actors, as well as the complex interaction between global and local dynamics. Various speakers noted the need for broader, more diverse and inclusive interreligious efforts which reflected the multiform relations of religion and society in the region. In this regard, calls were made to overcome the gap between scholarly and elite dialogues, on the one hand, and grassroots dialogues on the other.

Other panelists lamented the exclusion of women and youth from dialogue initiatives, and still others urged for interreligious responses to the conflict to overcome simplistic Muslim-Jewish framings of it and to incorporate the perspectives of Christian and other religious and ethnic groups into the narrative as a cultural asset for dialogue in the region.

Some participants suggested that religious diplomacy could be “upgraded” in the region and be turned into a platform for cooperation among policy practitioners of foreign policy. As one participant argued, this might “create a coherent representation of the future of cultural relations on the one hand, and actively counter militant religious representations on the other”. Some positive recent examples of religious diplomacy from the UK were cited which highlighted the role of trust, of creative reciprocity, and dialogue vocabularies which humanized one other. Building and maintaining relationships over time was also seen to be essential.

Educational initiatives were central to the remarks of several participants in this panel. Efforts at educational reform were encouraged which would denounce violence in the name of religion and delegitimize stereotypes of religious others which implicitly or explicitly defined them as infidels. Cultural diplomacy, in this light, was seen as an important task for interreligious dialogue.

Many participants also emphasized the need for interreligious action to be focused on people’s lives, on human rights and human security, and the universal dimension of the sacredness of all believers. Calls were made for interreligious actors to be outspoken about all victims of any kind and age and to resist religious identitarianism and the descent into what one participant

referred to as the habituation of “necropolitics” in the war in Gaza and the growing insensitivity to the destruction of civilian lives, places of worship, universities, hospitals, as well as other cultural and artistic sites.

Finally, a number of panelists urged religious communities and actors to steadfastly engage in a dialogue of life that genuinely sought the good of the others. One participant argued that there was an urgent need for credible witness by faith communities in the region and spoke about the importance of interreligious spirituality and the value of human fraternity and shared life experiences, even in the context of the present war and violence. Another participant appealed to the value of hope, especially as interreligious actors and communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ENGAGE RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PEACE EFFORTS** Religious leaders and religious language can be engaged for their moral authority to advocate for peace, justice and non-violence. Efforts must be made to de-escalate narratives that lead to dehumanization and conflict, particularly those framing conflicts as holy wars. Regular interreligious engagement can build understanding and trust among different religious communities by focusing on shared values and common goals
- **ADVOCATE FOR HUMAN-CENTRIC PEACEBUILDING** Peacebuilding efforts must prioritize human lives, emphasizing the sanctity of human life and urging conflicting parties to avoid sacrificing lives for political goals. Immediate humanitarian needs and human rights issues should be addressed as a foundation for long-term peace, ensuring that the peace process is grounded in respect for human dignity
- **SUPPORT SOCIO-CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES** Socio-cultural initiatives including interpersonal encounters, artistic, musical and sporting initiatives, cultural exchange programs, and educational reform should be supported to foster mutual understanding, respect and coexistence. Educational programs must teach the values of peace and tolerance to younger generations, promoting the "courage of alterity" by including education about diverse religious communities

4. RELIGIOUS LEADERS, NON-VIOLENCE AND RECONCILIATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Given the militarization of the crisis and high levels of violence, how can religious leaders and communities be more actively involved in the public discussion on the crisis to stretch the imagination of the possible non-violent strategies to build peace and foster solidarity? What are the concrete modalities through which the international community should build a religious engagement component into ongoing conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts? For example, how can religious leaders and communities work to further prevent the escalation of local inter-communal and religious tensions? How can religious leaders contribute to achieving local reconciliation? How can religious leaders help to achieve a ceasefire as building blocks of a larger conflict-resolution agreement?

In panel four, experts explored the role that religious leaders and communities could play in fostering non-violent strategies and promoting solidarity in the Middle East. The escalating crisis, marked by militarization and pervasive violence, it was noted, necessitated innovative approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Themes of the panel included how to leverage religious engagement to mitigate conflict, prevent the escalation of inter-communal tensions, and contribute to reconciliation efforts. It examined the concrete modalities through which the international community could integrate religious actors into ongoing peacebuilding initiatives.

Panelists drew on examples from grassroots and strategic initiatives to discuss the role of religious actors in dialogue facilitation between conflicting parties, especially in the mediation of disputes, and providing moral guidance rooted in religious teachings that emphasized peace, compassion and human dignity. Participants spoke about the positive but difficult examples learned from mixed city experiments in Israel as well as the recent work of the USAID to formulate a Strategic Religious Engagement policy. The panelists counseled that they must leverage their influence and trust within communities to de-escalate tensions, encourage reconciliation, and mobilize collective action towards dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives. As one participant argued, religious communities, states and the international community must invest in peace and that “dialogue represents the only path forward”.

Panelists also emphasized investment in the building of counter or “restorative” narratives by religious actors that avoided “faith-washing” violent discursive histories of exclusion. Peacebuilding required a more capacious

approach, it was argued, which drew on the plural and contested nature of religious history and ideas and made use of critical hermeneutical tools to challenge narratives of supremacy in the name of human dignity.

On a more concrete level, discussion points included strategies for religious leaders to facilitate local reconciliation, contribute to ceasefire agreements, and enhance the overall conflict-resolution framework.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **LEVERAGE OF SACRED TEXTS FOR PEACE** by emphasizing their use to convey messages of love and harmony rather than blame and shame, encouraging religious leaders to promote non-violent communication and reduce religious extremism
- **OVERCOME FEAR AND IDEOLOGY** by addressing the fears and ideologies that hinder religious leaders from advancing peace, and by recognizing and working through the emotional and psychological barriers to facilitate more effective religious engagement, especially in current conflict times. As one participant noted, “Fear is a Force multiplier”
- **AVOID BINARY BLAMING** by moving beyond simplistic blame narratives, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of conflicts, and fostering environments where dialogue can lead to meaningful action. Recognizing the longing for peace by the other can be a first step in this process
- **SUSTAIN AND EXPAND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE** by building on the successes of Christian-Muslim dialogue and revitalizing weaker areas of interfaith engagement. Recognizing the potential for dialogue to generate unexpected positive developments
- **WORK TOWARDS JUSTICE-ORIENTED PEACEBUILDING** by framing peace efforts within a context of past injustices, and addressing issues such as impunity and double standards
- **SUSTAIN AND STRENGTHEN LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIPS WITH RELIGIOUS ACTORS** Religious engagement spaces and networking, involving building and preserving connections between individuals, groups, and public bodies across interreligious and religious-secular divides, requires a medium to long-term commitment to foster trusting relationships to navigate deep and sensitive conversations. Public institutions that wish to take the role of religious actors seriously need to recognize the value of time and commit to medium- to long-term actions aimed at creating honest yet safe spaces for dialogue among all participants

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