



**UNAOC**  
United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

**THE UNITED NATIONS  
PLAN OF ACTION  
*to safeguard*  
RELIGIOUS SITES:**

**In Unity and Solidarity for  
Safe and Peaceful Worship**



The United Nations Plan of Action  
to Safeguard Religious Sites:

## **In Unity and Solidarity for Safe and Peaceful Worship**

*“Rings of Peace”*



## FOREWORD

Our world has witnessed a tragic surge in anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred, attacks on Christians and violence targeting members of other faiths and traditions.

In recent months alone, we have seen Jews murdered in synagogues, their gravestones defaced with swastikas; Muslims gunned down in mosques, their religious sites vandalized; Christians killed at prayer, their churches torched.

In the face of these unspeakable tragedies, we have also been deeply moved by extraordinary displays of support, love and solidarity from religious communities across the globe for the victims of such attacks.

People everywhere must be allowed to observe and practice their faith in peace, as affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Religious sites and all places of worship and contemplation should be safe havens, not sites of terror or bloodshed.

For all these reasons, I asked the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations to develop a Plan of Action for the organization to be fully engaged in support of safeguarding religious sites.

The Plan was informed by significant outreach with a wide variety of actors -- including governments, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, civil society, young women and men, local communities, traditional and social media, and the private sector.

This United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites provides concrete recommendations to support Member States in their efforts to ensure that religious sites are safe, that worshipers can observe their rituals in peace, and that the values of compassion and tolerance are fostered globally.

When people are attacked because of their religion or beliefs, all of society is diminished. Together, we can help prevent attacks against religious sites and contribute to guaranteeing the safety of the faithful to worship in peace.



**António Guterres**  
United Nations Secretary-General  
12 September 2019

## QUOTES

“

*“Love your neighbor as yourself. No commandment is greater than these”*

Mark 12:31

“

*“Had it not been for God’s repelling some men by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of God is of mentioned, would assuredly have been destroyed”*

The Quran 22:40

“

*“What is hateful to you, do not do to another. This is the whole Torah”*

Talmud, Shabbat 31a

“

*“He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye”*

Buddha

“

*“One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire”*

Mahabharata Anusasana Parva 113:8

“

*“I believe in the absolute oneness of God and therefore of humanity. What difference that it makes that we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source”*

Mahatma Gandhi

## PREAMBLE

Religious sites are representative of the history, social fabric and traditions of people in every country and community all over the planet and must be fully respected as places of peace and harmony where worshippers feel safe to practice their rituals.

In the wake of the attacks against mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, the United Nations Secretary-General requested the High Representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations to develop a Plan of Action for the United Nations to explore actions to prevent attacks and guarantee the sanctity of religious sites and the safety of worshippers.

This Plan is a global call to rally around our most basic tenets of humanity and solidarity and to reaffirm the sanctity of all religious sites and the safety of all worshippers who visit houses of worship in a spirit of compassion and respect.

The increasing number of attacks against religious sites in the past years is a stark reminder that no country and no faith is spared from those heinous crimes. Attacks and all acts of violence against religious sites and worshippers must be condemned without exception. There is a clear sense of urgency that the time has come for all relevant actors to come together and identify actions that can help prevent attacks against religious sites and contribute to guaranteeing the safety of the faithful to worship in peace.

Our collective endeavor to safeguard the sanctity of religious sites must be part of a broader commitment on the part of the international community to strengthen its efforts for the peaceful settlement of ongoing conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, including by addressing interreligious conflicts that constitute a major obstacle to sustainable peace, stability and security.

This Plan is elaborated in consonance with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, noting that this right includes the right of individuals and communities to manifest their religions and beliefs in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The Plan is also mindful of United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/73/176, which stresses the right of everyone to freedom of religion or belief including the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in worship and observance; of resolution A/RES/73/285 which strongly deplores all acts of violence against persons on the basis

of their religion or belief and such acts directed against places of worship, as well as all attacks on and in religious places, sites and shrines that are in violation of international law; and of resolution *A/RES/72/17*, which urges all Member States to take all appropriate measures to combat hatred, intolerance and acts of violence, including those motivated by religious extremism and to encourage understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief.

Furthermore, a number of Security Council resolutions have emphasized that terrorism and violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, or civilization, and reaffirmed that Member States must ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law, and international humanitarian law.

This Plan is fully supportive of the decision taken by United Nations General Assembly resolution *A/RES/73/296* to designate 22 August as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, as an important step forward to put this issue at the forefront of the agenda of the international community.

Several religious sites also have great cultural significance. Human Rights Council resolution 37/17 on “Cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage”, condemns all acts of unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, including as a result of terrorist attacks, and containing a number of recommendations for Member States.

Religious sources provide compelling messages related to our shared humanity and the respect for one another. For instance, the Marrakesh Declaration, adopted in January 2016, reaffirms the framework of the Charter of Medina, which recognizes diversity and freedom of religion and establishes the principle of equality in rights and responsibilities of all citizens. The Charter contains the foundation of inclusive and pluralistic societies. Harmony, cooperation and mutual understanding are found when people commit to shared ethical values.

Reference is also made to the 29 principles of the Mecca Document, adopted during the Conference organized by the Muslim World League in May 2019, which emphasize the values of tolerance and equality and denounce all forms of discrimination against “the other”. The Mecca Document encourages enforcing laws against preachers who sow the seeds of violence and hatred. The Document also stresses women’s religious, political and social rights.

The Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in February 2019, is also testimony of the importance that religious leaders attach to the recognition and respect for one another for the good of humanity. The Declaration stresses mutual respect, tolerance, compassion and peace, as well as the concept of full citizenship, which is based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice and respect.

The agreement signed between the Muslim World League and the Appeal of Conscience Foundation in April 2019 is another important recent initiative, which contains a call upon all people, nations and leaders to ensure the sanctity of religious sites as essential to our common humanity, under the guiding principle of the safety of everyone to pray, gather for worship, or remember the deceased.

Within the United Nations system, UNESCO has a particular role to play in protecting and promoting cultural and religious pluralism, particularly by safeguarding cultural and natural heritage of religious interest. The 'Statement on the protection of religious properties within the framework of the World Heritage Convention', adopted in 2010, was the first document to provide general recommendations on this specific issue, and led to the launch of the UNESCO Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest, which supports Member States in the development of general guidance regarding the management of religious heritage.

UNESCO's actions to safeguard and reconstruct cultural and religious heritage in conflict and post-conflict situations also supports the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution S/RES/2347, which affirms that directing unlawful attacks against sites and buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, or historic monuments, may constitute, under certain circumstances and pursuant to international law, a war crime, and that perpetrators of such attacks must be brought to justice.

In this context, this Plan is anchored in the following principles:

**RESPECT** for all peoples, regardless of their faith, culture and history.

**RESPONSIBILITY** to build bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation.

**DIVERSITY** to accept and respect the differences among human beings.

**DIALOGUE** as a tool to better communicate and engage with one other.

**SOLIDARITY** to support and share compassion for one another, particularly in times of sorrow or trouble.

**STANDING TOGETHER** as one to respond with unity to attempts to divide us.

**STAYING TOGETHER** as one to ensure that unity in response to attacks against religious sites is sustained and reinforced overtime.

This Plan is meant to provide a result-oriented framework for action with suggested recommendations to support relevant stakeholders in their efforts to prevent possible attacks against religious sites and enhance preparedness and response to safeguard religious sites and worshippers.

This Plan also recognizes that, under the United Nations Charter, Member States bear the primary responsibility to ensure security in their territory and to protect their civilians.

In this context, the first section explores preventive actions by relevant stakeholders to address drivers that can result in violent acts against religious sites and worshippers, and the second section focuses on actions and recommendations to enhance preparedness and responses to possible attacks by all relevant actors.

A mapping of religious sites around the world will be developed in full cooperation with governments and other relevant stakeholders to produce an online interactive tool which will serve as a reminder of the universality of religious sites around the world and contribute to fostering respect and understanding of their profound significance for individuals and communities on every continent. The mapping can also help identify best practices in the safeguard of religious sites which can encourage cross-fertilization among relevant actors on a voluntary basis.



## PREVENTION

Effective preventative strategies must identify and address the underlying root causes that lead individuals and groups to commit terrorist attacks against people of other faiths in their places of worship. The full participation and sustained engagement of governments and other relevant stakeholders, including religious leaders, civil society and local communities online service providers and media more broadly, is crucial for the effectiveness and success of preventive actions.

Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and its sister General Assembly resolution 66/167, recognize that interfaith and intercultural dialogue can be among the best protections against religious intolerance and that a continuing dialogue on these issues can help overcome misperceptions. The Istanbul Process established for the implementation of resolution 16/18 provides a key policy framework for cooperation in countering religious intolerance, discrimination and violence based on religion or belief. The initiative taken by Kazakhstan in 2003 to convey a Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana every three years has translated into commitments by religious leaders to prevent violent incidents caused by hatred and intolerance, including the promotion of interreligious and interfaith dialogue to build a conflict-free world.

The World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, organized biennially by Azerbaijan in cooperation with United Nations organizations, the Council of Europe and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is one of the main global platforms for promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

Religious leaders play a crucial role in building trust, fostering dialogue, stressing unity, solidarity, and mutual understanding, and in offering positive and moderate narratives in response to hatred and division. The active and sustained engagement of religious leaders to build and effectively communicate through all available channels a counter-narrative to hatred and violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism is crucial. Moreover, sustained collaboration among different religions through interreligious dialogue will contribute to reinforcing synergies and strengthening a consistent compelling narrative to respond to violent extremism and terrorist narratives.

This engagement by religious leaders should not be limited to the immediate response to attacks against religious sites, but rather translate into sustained engagement to

develop strategies with concrete actions to foster solidarity, respect and mutual understanding.

In the Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together referred to in the Preamble, His Holiness Pope Francis and the His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, declared that religions must never incite hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, and called upon all concerned to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence and extremism. The Declaration also contains a strong call for mutual understanding and religious pluralism and clearly states that every attempt to attack religious sites or threaten them is a deviation from the teachings of religions and a clear violation of international law.

The 2017 United Nations Plan of Action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes, contains a number a recommendations which are relevant for this Plan, in particular specific actions to prevent and counter incitement to violence and the prevention of incitement to violent extremism, as well as those recommendations related to enhancing education and capacity-building, interfaith dialogue, and collaboration with media.

In addition to faith actors, civil society, youth, women, local communities and parliaments can play a crucial role in identifying vulnerabilities and potential threats to religious sites. Moreover, partnerships between these actors and religious leaders operating religious sites can foster community resilience.

Through programs and activities addressing root causes and grievances that can lead to violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, and through their engagement with policy makers, civil society organizations can play an important role in preventive strategies, given their capacity for social mobilization.

As the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism states, the world's 1.8 billion young people are a vital partner in the prevention of violent extremism. Youth empowerment, including their meaningful participation in decision-making, can play an important role in whole-of-society preventive approaches.

It is crucial that strategies to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to violent terrorism are gender sensitive and that the role of women is particularly recognized and supported. Female religious actors also have an important role to play to promote diversity, dialogue, respect, and mutual understanding.

Young men and women are the most affected by violence, but they can play important roles as agents of positive change, especially through skills development, training, and other forms of engagement. The importance of their role and contribution is recognized in Security Council resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security, as well as in Pillar 5 of the UN Youth Strategy, Youth 2030, which calls for the increased participation of young people in peacebuilding efforts.

Furthermore, the Security Council has explicitly noted in resolution 2242 (2015) the substantial link between women's meaningful involvement in efforts to prevent, resolve and rebuild from conflict and those efforts' effectiveness and long-term sustainability, as well as the need for greater resourcing, accountability, political will and attitudinal change. The Council has also reiterated its call for Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, and encourages those supporting peace processes to facilitate women's meaningful inclusion in negotiating parties' delegation to peace talks.

The active and continued involvement of local communities in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism conducive to terrorism will ensure that strategies are context-sensitive, foster social cohesion, and fully take into account the specific needs of beneficiaries.

In the exercise of their law-making prerogatives, national Parliaments with the support of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, play an important role across the spectrum of countering violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism. Parliaments can also contribute to public debate and advocacy related to the importance of safeguarding of religious sites.

## Education

The promotion of education programs on the significance and protection of religious sites and the promotion of tolerance and respect towards other religions and cultures can have a positive effect to help recognize the dignity and the right of human beings to practice their faith in safety and peace, foster dialogue and respect and question the legitimacy of extremist ideologies and terrorist narratives. Reference is made to the initiative of Lebanon to establish an Academy for Human Encounters and Dialogue that will promote the culture of peace and interfaith exchanges. The network of UNESCO Chairs in Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue can also be an important resource in this regard.

UN Security Council resolution 2354 (2017) states that Member States should consider supporting the efforts aimed at raising public awareness regarding counter-terrorist narratives through education and media, including through dedicated educational programs to pre-empt youth acceptance to terrorist narratives.

Teachers and educators can be empowered to understand the root causes of potential violent extremism and its manifestations. Education programs can also promote universal values and foster interreligious dialogue, peaceful coexistence, and tolerance based on mutual respect.

The convening power of sports to reinforce mutual respect, including by highlighting the role of religious sites in bringing people together and by expressing solidarity in the case of attacks against religious sites, should also be factored in.

Education programs at community level involving youth can help build mutual understanding and respect for religious sites, in particular through the provision of accessible and engaging resources to enhance intercultural and interreligious competencies.

UNESCO has developed resources for teachers and education policy-makers on the prevention of violent extremism and, within the framework of Global Citizenship Education, and is carrying out extensive work to address anti-Semitism.

## Hate Speech

Terrorist attacks against religious sites stress the importance of addressing the impact of the dissemination of hate speech by terrorist and radicalized individuals and groups in the mainstream media and on the internet in particular.

Recent initiatives by the United Nations, Member States, and online service providers, speak to the urgency to come up with multi-pronged strategies and actions that can provide an effective response to the challenge of hate speech.

As such, the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech launched on 18 June, identifies interventions in critical areas that can be of interest for preventing attacks against religious sites including monitoring and analyzing hate speech; addressing root causes, drivers and actors of hate speech; convening relevant actors; engaging with new and traditional media; using education as a tool for addressing and countering hate speech; and leveraging partnerships.

For its part, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate initiative Tech Against Terrorism and the industry-led initiative the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), have been working in a collaborative manner to address the exploitation of information and communication technology by terrorists and violent extremists, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The recommendation contained in the report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation to develop a Global Commitment on Digital Trust and Security, which would build trust, strengthen the implementation of norms for responsible uses of technology and propose priorities for action, can be an important tool to help ensure that digital technology is not used to incite violence.

In July 2019, the General Assembly adopted resolution A/73/L.100, which condemns any advocacy or hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence in all types of media and calls upon Member States to reject the spread of hate speech, that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

### Online Hate Speech

The Christchurch Call to Action to eliminate terrorist and extremist content online, signed in Paris on 15 May 2019, contains strong recommendations that may be useful for consideration on the part of online providers and tech companies to take targeted actions to that end. These actions may include developing effective interventions, ensure appropriate cooperation with and among law enforcement agencies, and develop processes to allow governments and online service providers to respond rapidly, effectively and in a coordinated manner to the dissemination of terrorist and extremist content following a terrorist event. The Call to Action also recognizes the role of civil society in supporting the efforts contained in the Call.

Individual Member States are also taking measures to address online hate speech, and most recently in July 2019, France's National Assembly adopted a bill designed to curtail online hate speech, giving social media platforms twenty-four hours to remove hateful content or risk fines of up to four percent of their global revenue.

A more proactive approach by online service providers to address online hate speech is particularly important. The decision by Facebook to ban individuals or organizations that promote or engage in violence and hate, regardless of ideology, is encouraging and shows that online service providers are increasingly more aware of their role and responsibility for the content that is shared on their respective platforms and that they

are willing to explore concrete measures to address online hate speech. In July 2019, Twitter announced an expansion of policies around hateful content that dehumanizes others based on their religion. Tweets that dehumanize whole religious groups will be eliminated when they are reported to the company.

Reference is also made to the global platform provided by the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as an opportunity for state actors and internet service providers to take stock of progress made in curbing hate speech online and improve on it.

## Recommendations:

### United Nations:

- Develop a global communications campaign to foster mutual respect and understanding, which will contribute to enhancing media awareness. Terrorist attacks and hatred seek to divide us. A campaign to foster unity and solidarity will be very powerful to counteract those messages.
- Develop a mapping of religious sites around the world which will produce an online interactive tool to capture the universality of religious sites and contribute to fostering respect and understanding of their profound significance for individuals and communities on every continent.
- Support the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General's Strategy and Action Plan on Hate Speech and of the United Nations Plan of Action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.
- Continue to develop strategies and tools aiming at strengthening the protection of heritage, including that of religious interest, and preventing the instrumentalization of culture from exacerbating religious differences and tensions.
- Pursue efforts on the prevention of violent extremism through education- within the framework of Global Citizenship Education- to foster respect and appreciation for diversity.
- Strengthen cooperation with regional organizations that aims at fostering intercultural dialogue based on the fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

#### States:

- Develop multi-disciplinary national plans anchored in the Sustainable Development Goals to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.
- Engage with religious leaders to promote respect and mutual understanding through interfaith activities
- Encourage promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue and include the national strategies
- Facilitate the involvement of civil society in strategies and programs to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism through the organization of workshops and other initiatives and establish benchmarks to measure progress in the implementation of relevant strategies and programs.
- In policies related to youth, integrate young people in decision-making and consider policies and programs involving and targeting hard to reach young people who may be prone to radicalization.
- Mainstream gender in the design and implementation of plans and actions to prevent violent extremism and as when conducive to terrorism.
- Invest in gender-sensitive research and data collection on women's roles in preventing violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.
- Invest in education from an early age to ensure that children have access to curricula that promotes tolerance and mutual understanding when it comes to different cultures and religions, in line with the values and learning objectives of Global Citizenship Education, in cooperation with UNESCO.
- Strengthen national mechanisms to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts, including efforts to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, which can have an impact on the protection of religious sites.
- Make use of current tools and mechanisms offered by the United Nations system for the prevention of violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.

#### Religious Leaders:

- On the occasion of the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief to be observed on an annual basis on 22 August, unite in prayer in remembrance of the victims and in support of interfaith dialogue and solidarity. It is recommended that religious leaders from all major religions and faiths rally around a mutually agreed text that would reinforce shared beliefs and foster unity.
- Dedicate the next session of the annual World Interfaith Harmony Week to be held in 2020 to the protection of religious sites.

- Proactively and regularly engage in interfaith dialogue, including the promotion of solidarity and resilience.
- Reach out within their own community to individuals or groups who can be prone to radicalization and possible recruitment by violent extremist groups and terrorist organizations.
- Engage with women and youth, in particular, to build strong counter-narratives to hatred and alienation.
- Promote education initiatives to highlight the role of religious sites in bringing people together, with particular stress on education activities at the local level involving youth and communities living around religious sites.
- Discuss issues of contemporary relevance with the congregation and educate them on other religions and cultural diversity to promote interreligious dialogue, understanding, mutual respect and peace.
- Stay engaged and be vocal and active when religious sites and worshippers from other religions and faiths are targeted.
- Actively and proactively engage on social media to reach out to a variety of users.
- Develop media content, including through the creation or strengthening of websites to make religious texts and messages accessible to a wider audience and provide answer to challenges related to social exclusion, annihilation, and hatred.
- Use their influence to persuade those with whom they hold influence to avoid inflammatory speech.

#### Civil Society:

- Develop coalitions of civil society organizations to work with individuals and communities vulnerable to radicalization.
- Promote initiatives for intra- and inter-faith dialogue that foster inter-communal understanding, help resolve differences, and build community resilience.

#### Online Providers:

- Commit to implementing the Joint Statement in Support of Christchurch Call, including the individual and collaborative actions contained in the Statement related to the prohibition of the distribution of terrorist and violent extremist content; reporting mechanisms; enhanced technology and transparency; crisis protocols, education and combatting online hate.
- Build partnerships and collaboration with governments, civil society, and educational institutions that will contribute to identifying and removing terrorist and violent extremism content from online platforms expeditiously.



## PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

In accordance with the United Nations Charter, Member States bear the primary responsibility to ensure security in their territory and to protect their civilians.

This Plan intends to provide support to Member States in the implementation of their national strategies to safeguard religious sites.

In its resolution A/RES/55/254, the United Nations General Assembly “calls upon all States to exert their utmost efforts to ensure that religious sites are fully respected in conformity with international standards and in accordance with their national legislation and to adopt adequate measures aimed at preventing such acts or threats of violence, and invites relevant intergovernmental and non-intergovernmental organizations to contribute to those efforts by developing appropriate initiatives in this field”.

United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/72/17 urges all States to take all appropriate measures to combat hatred, intolerance and acts of violence motivated by religious extremism, and to encourage understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. It also requests the Secretary-General to devote attention to the effects of terrorist acts against religious sites in his reports.

In its resolution 2396 (2017), the United Nations Security Council stressed the need for States to develop, renew or amend national risk and threat assessments to take into account soft targets including religious sites, in order to develop appropriate contingency and emergency-response plans for terrorist attacks. It also calls on States to establish or strengthen national, regional and international partnerships with public and private stakeholders on the sharing of information and experience to prevent, protect, mitigate, investigate, respond to, and recover from, damage from terrorist attacks against soft targets.

Religious sites are especially vulnerable to attacks due to their accessibility and the fact that there are usually limited security measures in place. Attacks against religious sites targeting worshippers have political impact and contribute to spreading the message of violent extremist groups and individuals.

Striking the most appropriate and context-sensitive balance between stricter security protocols and the preservation of the open nature of religious sites is likely to pose challenges for religious leaders and worshippers. However, it is important to recognize

that strengthened measures may be needed to ensure better protection against potential attacks. Decisions in this regard must be taken by relevant stakeholders on a context-sensitive case-by-case basis.

Protection of religious sites is addressed by Member States through a variety of normative frameworks and policy instruments including national security strategies. A thorough analysis of potential threats, risk assessments to adapt policies to the evolving nature of threats, information sharing at all levels of government, as well as information and analysis sharing with religious leaders, are key to put in place robust national strategies.

In the framework of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum, the Antalya Memorandum on Protection of Soft Targets in a Counter-Terrorism Context and the Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism contain good practices and guidelines.

In line with the 2015 Strategy for the reinforcement of the Organization's action for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict and corresponding Action Plan, UNESCO has implemented a number of emergency preparedness and response activities aimed at safeguarding religious heritage, including through its Heritage Emergency Fund. As part of UNESCO's initiative to "Revive the Spirit of Mosul", UNESCO is working to reconstruct the city's historic mosques, churches and Yazidi temples. UNESCO also supports preparedness and response actions around religious sites through its Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest, in line with its 2010 'Statement on the protection of religious properties within the framework of the World Heritage Convention'.

## Recommendations:

### United Nations:

- Support the implementation of UNESCO's Strategy for the reinforcement of the Organization's action for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict and its corresponding Action Plan.

**States:**

National Frameworks:

- Ensure that religious sites are defined as vulnerable targets and include in relevant national strategies and plans.
- Review or strengthen existing national strategies and plans to make them more effective for safeguarding religious sites.
- Develop or strengthen national plans to address early-warning systems, emergency response, crisis management, security, and resilience.
- Consider establishing, where appropriate, in accordance with national legislation and procedures, specialized units in central and local administrations to safeguard religious sites.
- Carry out assessments of the respective roles and responsibilities of different entities at all levels of government, including at the local level, and develop and maintain relationships between various levels of government to ensure a multi-pronged and coordinated approach that fosters synergies among different actors with responsibilities in safeguarding religious sites.

Preparedness and Response:

- Determine what constitutes 'soft' targets and specify particularly vulnerable religious sites and conduct risk assessments on threats against religious sites regularly based on all available information from government and non-government sources.
- Ensure that comprehensive measures are in place for the immediate response to an attack in mitigating the impact and where local and religious leaders, communities and civil society actors play a key role.
- Develop relevant products and tools, such as general guidelines on specific protective measures for religious sites.

Relations with other stakeholders:

- Develop and sustain relationships between government and religious leaders to build trust and help ensure information sharing.
- Connect religious leaders with local law enforcement authorities to build trust and cooperation, and regularly discuss with religious leaders the threat environment.
- Organize training by law enforcement to members of congregations on security measures.

- Develop public-private partnerships at all levels of Government, including State, local and provincial.
- Continue to work closely with UNESCO in the protection of the heritage of religious interest and on resilience-building of youth through Global Citizenship Education.

#### Religious leaders:

- Conduct risk assessments and prioritize targets accordingly.
- Engage in regular information sharing with governments.
- Hold regular discussions with worshippers about the importance of preparation and early-warning.
- Share information with law enforcement and first responders about the particular features and characteristics of religious sites in preparation for a possible attack and subsequent emergency response. Law enforcement can assist in identifying the signs of a potentially volatile situation and help religious sites proactively seek to prevent an incident from escalating.
- Facilitate engagement of law enforcement officers with the community to enhance trust. In particular, facilitate training by law enforcement to assist worshippers and religious leaders into detecting threats and potential attacks and devising effective responses that can reduce the consequences of an attack.

#### States and Religious Leaders:

- Develop joint training sessions, communication networks, information-sharing and early-warning mechanisms.

#### Civil Society:

- Build partnerships with religious leaders and government officials to raise awareness about how to prepare and respond to attacks against religious sites.
- Organize community-level initiatives and help disseminate information about preparedness and response to attacks to religious sites.

## WAY FORWARD AND ACTION POINTS

It is recommended that this Plan be implemented at the international, regional and national levels with the support of the United Nations, as appropriate. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) will lead the coordination with all relevant stakeholders.

In that context, the United Nations Secretary-General will convene a global conference in 2020 involving United Nations entities, Member States, political figures, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, media and civil society. The conference will contribute to spearheading political support for specific actions to take the Plan forward.

In that respect, UNAOC will lead coordination efforts with other relevant UN entities, including UNESCO, OHCHR, UNOCT, CTED and OSAPG.

UNAOC will submit a report at the end of 2020 on the progress of the implementation of the Plan of Action.

# ANNEX I: RECOMMENDATIONS

## PREVENTION

### United Nations:

- Develop a global communications campaign to foster mutual respect and understanding, which will contribute to enhancing media awareness. Terrorist attacks and hatred seek to divide us. A campaign to foster unity and solidarity will be very powerful to counteract those messages.
- Develop a mapping of religious sites around the world which will produce an online interactive tool to capture the spirituality of religious sites and contribute to fostering respect and understanding of their profound significance for individuals and communities on every continent.
- Support the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General's Strategy and Action Plan on Hate Speech and of the United Nations Plan of Action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.
- Continue to develop strategies and tools aiming at strengthening the protection of heritage, including that of religious interest, and preventing the instrumentalization of culture from exacerbating religious differences and tensions.
- Pursue efforts on the prevention of violent extremism through education- within the framework of Global Citizenship Education- to foster respect and appreciation for diversity.
- Strengthen cooperation with regional organizations that aim at fostering intercultural dialogue based on the fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

### States:

- Develop multi-disciplinary national plans anchored in the Sustainable Development Goals to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.
- Engage with religious leaders to promote respect and mutual understanding through interfaith activities.
- Facilitate the involvement of civil society in strategies and programs to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism through the organization of workshops and other initiatives and establish benchmarks to measure progress in the implementation of relevant strategies and programs.

- In policies related to youth, integrate young people in decision-making and consider policies and programs involving and targeting hard to reach young people who may be prone to radicalization.
- Mainstream gender in the design and implementation of plans and actions to prevent violent extremism and as when conducive to terrorism.
- Invest in gender-sensitive research and data collection on women's roles in preventing violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.
- Invest in education from an early age to ensure that children have access to curricula that promotes tolerance and mutual understanding when it comes to different cultures and religions, in line with the values and learning objectives of Global Citizenship Education, in cooperation with UNESCO.
- Strengthen national mechanisms to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts, including efforts to prevent violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism, which can have an impact on the protection of religious sites.
- Make use of current tools and mechanisms offered by the United Nations system for the prevention of violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.

#### Religious Leaders:

- On the occasion of the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief to be observed on an annual basis on 22 August, unite in prayer in remembrance of the victims and in support of interfaith dialogue and solidarity. It is recommended that religious leaders from all major religions and faiths rally around a mutually agreed text that would reinforce shared beliefs and foster unity.
- Dedicate the next session of the annual World Interfaith Harmony Week to be held in 2020 to the protection of religious sites.
- Proactively and regularly engage in interfaith dialogue, including the promotion of solidarity and resilience.
- Reach out within their own community to individuals or groups who can be prone to radicalization and possible recruitment by violent extremist groups and terrorist organizations.
- Engage with women and youth, in particular, to build strong counter-narratives to hatred and alienation.
- Promote education initiatives to highlight the role of religious sites in bringing people together, with particular stress on education activities at the local level involving youth and communities living around religious sites.

- Discuss issues of contemporary relevance with the congregation and educate them on other religions and cultural diversity to promote interreligious dialogue, understanding, mutual respect and peace.
- Stay engaged and be vocal and active when religious sites and worshippers from other religions and faiths are targeted.
- Actively and proactively engage on social media to reach out to a variety of users.
- Develop media content, including through the creation or strengthening of websites to make religious texts and messages accessible to a wider audience and provide answer to challenges related to social exclusion, annihilation, and hatred.
- Use their influence to persuade those with whom they hold influence to avoid inflammatory speech.

#### Civil Society:

- Develop coalitions of civil society organizations to work with individuals and communities vulnerable to radicalization.
- Promote initiatives for intra- and inter-faith dialogue that foster inter-communal understanding, help resolve differences, and build community resilience.

#### Online Providers:

- Commit to implementing the Joint Statement in Support of Christchurch Call, including the individual and collaborative actions contained in the Statement related to the prohibition of the distribution of terrorist and violent extremist content; reporting mechanisms; enhanced technology and transparency; crisis protocols, education and combatting online hate.
- Build partnerships and collaboration with governments, civil society, and educational institutions that will contribute to identifying and removing terrorist and violent extremism content from online platforms expeditiously.

## PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

#### United Nations:

- Support the implementation of UNESCO's Strategy for the reinforcement of the Organization's action for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict and its corresponding Action Plan.



## States:

### *National Frameworks:*

- Ensure that religious sites are defined as vulnerable targets and include in relevant national strategies and plans.
- Review or strengthen existing national strategies and plans to make them more effective for safeguarding religious sites.
- Develop or strengthen national plans to address early-warning systems, emergency response, crisis management, security, and resilience.
- Consider establishing, where appropriate, in accordance with national legislation and procedures, specialized units in central and local administrations to safeguard religious sites.
- Carry out assessments of the respective roles and responsibilities of different entities at all levels of government, including at the local level, and develop and maintain relationships between various levels of government to ensure a multi-pronged and coordinated approach that fosters synergies among different actors with responsibilities in safeguarding religious sites.

### *Preparedness and Response:*

- Determine what constitutes 'soft' targets in the national targets and specify particularly vulnerable religious sites and conduct risk assessments on threats against religious sites regularly based on all available information from government and non-government sources.
- Ensure that comprehensive measures are in place for the immediate response to an attack in mitigating the impact and where local and religious leaders, communities and civil society actors play a key role.
- Develop relevant products and tools, such as general guidelines on specific protective measures for religious sites.

### *Relations with other stakeholders:*

- Develop and sustain relationships between government and religious leaders to build trust and help ensure information sharing.
- Connect religious leaders with local law enforcement authorities to build trust and cooperation, and regularly discuss with religious leaders the threat environment.
- Organize training by law enforcement to members of congregations on security measures.
- Develop public-private partnerships at all levels of Government, including State, local and provincial.

- Continue to work closely with UNESCO in the protection of the heritage of religious interest and on resilience-building of youth through Global Citizenship Education.

#### Religious leaders:

- Conduct risk assessments and prioritize targets accordingly.
- Engage in regular information sharing with governments.
- Hold regular discussions with worshippers about the importance of preparation and early-warning.
- Share information with law enforcement and first responders about the particular features and characteristics of religious sites in preparation for a possible attack and subsequent emergency response. Law enforcement can assist in identifying the signs of a potentially volatile situation and help religious sites proactively seek to prevent an incident from escalating.
- Facilitate engagement of law enforcement officers with the community to enhance trust. In particular, facilitate training by law enforcement to assist worshippers and religious leaders into detecting threats and potential attacks and devising effective responses that can reduce the consequences of an attack.

#### States and Religious Leaders:

- Develop joint training sessions, communication networks, information-sharing and early-warning mechanisms.

#### Civil Society:

- Build partnerships with religious leaders and government officials to raise awareness about how to prepare and respond to attacks against religious sites.
- Organize community-level initiatives and help disseminate information about preparedness and response to attacks to religious sites.

## ANNEX II: RESOURCES

### United Nations resolutions:

- General Assembly resolution A/RES/55/254  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/55/254>
- General Assembly resolution A/RES/66/167  
<https://undocs.org/A/RES/66/167>
- General Assembly resolution A/RES/72/17  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/72/17>
- General Assembly resolution A/RES/73/176  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/176>
- General Assembly resolution A/RES/73/285  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/285>
- General Assembly resolution A/RES/73/296  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/296>
- Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/1624\(2005\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1624(2005))
- Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2178%20\(2014\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2178%20(2014))
- Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2242\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2242(2015))
- Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015))
- Security Council Resolution 2341 (2017)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2341\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2341(2017))

- Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2347\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2347(2017))
- Security Council Resolution 2354 (2017)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2354\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2354(2017))
- Security Council Resolution 2396 (2017)  
[https://undocs.org/S/RES/2396\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2396(2017))
- Human Rights Council resolution 16/18  
[https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18\\_en.pdf](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18_en.pdf)
- Human Rights Council resolution 37/17  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/37/17>

#### United Nations initiatives:

- United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism  
<https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism>
- UN Secretary-General's Strategy and Action Plan on Hate Speech  
<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/publications-and-resources.shtml>  
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/pi2264.doc.htm>
- United Nations Plan of Action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes  
<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf>
- UNESCO Statement on the protection of religious properties within the framework of the World Heritage Convention  
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/>
- United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation Report  
<https://www.un.org/en/digital-cooperation-panel/>

- United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate initiative Tech Against Terrorism  
<https://www.techagainstterrorism.org>
- United Nations Youth Strategy: Youth 2030: Working with and for Young People  
[https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/18-00080\\_UN-Youth-Strategy\\_Web.pdf](https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/18-00080_UN-Youth-Strategy_Web.pdf)

### Relevant texts by religious leaders:

- Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together  
<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/04/190204f.html>
- Marrakesh Declaration  
<http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/marrakesh-declaration.html>
- Agreement between the Muslim World League and the Appeal of Conscience Foundation  
<http://www.appealofconscience.org/images/db/674-AgreementRASandDrAlIssaMuslimWorldLeague4.29.19.pdf>

### Other relevant documents:

- Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions  
<http://www.religions-congress.org/index.php?lang=english>
- World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue  
<http://bakuprocess.az>
- Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)  
<https://www.gifct.org>
- Christchurch Call to Action  
<https://www.christchurchcall.com/christchurch-call.pdf>