

Protecting Holy Sites in Violent Conflicts: How the **Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites** can safeguard holy sites and promote inter-religious reconciliation in *Bosnia Herzegovina, the Holy Land, Indonesia, Nigeria and Syria* **Consultation Report**

Introduction

A consultation on the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites took place at the Residence Palace in Brussels. The event was attended by 25 European representatives, including from the permanent missions of Austria, Serbia and Spain to the EU.

Five experts from four organizations (Oslo Centre for Human Rights, Inter-Religious Council in Bosnia Herzegovina, Search for Common Ground and Religions for Peace) presented their experiences on working for the Universal Code of Conduct to Protect Holy Sites. The event was moderated by the Council of Europe. Ambassador Torbjorn Froyness of the Council of Europe offered opening remarks to launch the event.



Presentations included background information on [understanding the Universal Code](#) and the activities, challenges and lessons learned from working on protecting holy sites in the [Holy Land](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Nigeria and Indonesia](#). Additionally, a [video](#) on the Najia girls in Nigeria focusing on the importance of working with education systems to promote religious harmony was also shown.

After the presentations, there were some questions and discussions around the topic, a summary of which can be found below.

Summary of the discussions

The **first topic** of discussion centred on the cooperation of religious leaders: how do they approach it, and is there a link between religious leaders and political leaders, specifically in Israel?



- The speakers indicated that they were appreciative of new religious leaders wanting to cooperate with the project and that they have had the full support of the existing leaders.
- Regarding the adoption of the Code in Israel, there were some concerns raised about the monitoring of shared sites. This led to a focus on the educational part of promoting the Code.

The **second topic** was about the activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: is there an improvement of the relationship between religious leaders and the community, and what are other positive initiatives like public condemnation?

- The Code brought trust between the religious leaders. Furthermore, the religious leaders over the years have realized that they can help each other, that if they help a minority in their region, their minority in another region might be helped as well.



For the **third topic**, the questions related to addressing protecting holy sites with new groups, including extremists.

- Regarding new groups in the Holy Land, they are currently working with rabbis/settlers and they are open to talk with them.
- Although access to fragile or conflict-affected States or regions is challenging, it is important to make an effort to reach the unreachable. For example, partnering with key actors who can gain access to these regions or areas, and commencing conversations with them outside of these areas would be a good start. Dealing with extremists groups is pertinent, especially when there are local ceasefires that are being made, there is something possible.

The **fourth topic** of discussion was on role of the UN and EU in advancing the agenda of Protecting Holy Sites.

- A general agreement was around the need for the Code despite some conventions in UNESCO. However, these conventions do not cover sites in marginalised neighbourhoods that are held sacred by the communities. The code was formulated to protect holy sites and focus on the role of religious leadership in order to protect these holy sites so they are part of these joint efforts
- The plan is for the UN to adopt its principles and support the work of religious communities and leaders for the implementation of the Code. UN approach needs to be such that the Member States of the UN will not take away ownership of this from religious leaders.
- Regarding the EU, the Code is in line with their guidelines.¹ The Code could be promoted within the mandate of the EU Guidelines.
- Furthermore, the role of the EU is incredibly understated. The EU for instance has been supporting Search for Common Ground's work in Nigeria, and we need to look at other avenues to promote the EU's role.



Finally, for the topic of working in the educational system, some questions were asked around the challenges of working with adults. Sharon Rosen mentioned that in Israel parents are generally not against the program Partnering with groups that parents trust helps, such as state institutions that are already working with adults. These institutions are entering interfaith work for the first time, using their own legitimacy to move forward. As for Indonesia and Nigeria, we're more talking about "lack of" adult participation than "opposition to".



Coverage of the event:

The event was also covered on Twitter, where SFCG Brussels live-tweeted highlights and photos to almost 1,000 followers. Some of these tweets were in turn re-tweeted and marked as favorite by our followers, reaching a much wider audience.

¹ Encourage States to ensure the protection of religious heritage sites and places of worship, especially when groups of people gathered in these places face threats. In cases of acts of vandalism and desecration or destruction of religious sites, the EU and Member States missions shall endeavour to visit the sites and to bring public attention to the destruction and its consequences. For more, please follow [this](#) link (EU) and [this](#) link (UN).