



Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites Policy Consultation

27th February 2014

Summary

Search for Common Ground completed its final activity for the Henry Luce Foundation grant by organizing and hosting a one day policy consultation on Safeguarding Holy Sites for UN and US policy makers and academics on February 27th in New York. 14 UN missions and US government organizations took part in discussions on the significant role religions play in world affairs and the reciprocal role policymakers can play in supporting inter-religious interests and cooperation to promote peace. Presentations by academics and religious leaders led to practical suggestions by interested policy makers and diplomats on how to support such cooperation. As a direct consequence meetings with representatives of the Bosnia/Herzegovina and German Foreign Ministries in their respective capitals are being held within a month of this successful consultation in order to address the specific and leading role these two countries can play in furthering these aims.

This consultation took place within the framework of an international, multi-faith initiative to advance a UN resolution based on the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, a practical document for the protection of sacred places that SFCG has been instrumental in developing together with three other non-governmental organizations: the internationally renowned NGO, Religions for Peace; The Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights; and the Norwegian NGO, One World in Dialogue.

The Henry Luce Foundation provided funding for the international travel and per diem of visiting presenters at the consultation while the Norwegian government provided funding for the venue and refreshments. Religions for Peace contributed administrative and secretarial support.

(Annex 1 – Invitation to the Consultation below at end of the report))

Participation

There were 32 Participants:

UN Policy Makers

H.E. Ambassador Ufuk Gokcen – Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Mission

H.E. Ambassador Mirsada Čolaković – Bosnia/Herzegovina Mission

Dragana Andjelic – Bosnia/Herzegovina Mission

Li Meghann – Canadian Mission

Akan Rakhmetullin – Kazakhstan Mission

Hadas Meitzad – Israeli Mission

Dmitry Repkov – Russian Mission

Christiane Hullmann – German Mission

Linh Ngwyen – Vietnamese Mission

Marcos Burity – Angolan Mission

Knut Langeland - Norwegian Mission



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US Policy Makers

Laurie Shestack Phipps – US Mission

Liora Danan – Advisor on Religious Affairs – US Secretary of State

Britt Manzo – USIP

UN Delegates

Elizabeth Begley – Pax Christie International

Lila Prounis – Greek Orthodox Archdiocese

Daniel Perell – Bahai International Community

Rev. Doug Hostetter – Mennonite Central Committee

Academics and NGO leaders

Dr. Ashok Gurung – New School for Social Research

Trebbe Johnson – Radical Joy for Hard Times

Rabbi Eric Greenberg – Multi Faith Alliance for Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Douglas Irvin Erickson – New York Theological Seminary

Dr. Jafar Jawad – Al-Hakim Foundation

Arvind Vora – Long Island Multi Faith Forum

Annette Blum - Synergos Global Philanthropy Circle

Rev. Chloe Breyer – The Interfaith Center of New York

Dr. Brian Grim – Religious Freedom and Business Foundation

Dr. William Vendley – Religions for Peace

Emir Kovacevic – Interreligious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Stein Villumstad – European Council of Religious Leaders

Rev. Dag Aakre – One World in Dialogue

Sharon Rosen – Search for Common Ground

NB. In addition and just prior to the consultation the organizers held bilateral meetings on the subject of the role of policy makers in safeguarding holy sites with the following who could not attend the consultation:

- Permanent **Mission of Indonesia**
- Permanent **Mission of Peru**
- Permanent **Mission of India**
- H.E. Ambassador Noel Sinclair from the **President of the General Assembly's office**
- Representative of **UNESCO**

Agenda Report

After a light lunch the meeting began with a welcome by **Dr. William F. Vendley**, Secretary General, Religions for Peace, the world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition affiliated with the UN that advances common action for peace. Religions for Peace is also a partner of the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites Initiative.



Dr. Vendley set the stage by emphasizing the significance of holy sites for billions of people around the world and the need for cooperation among policy makers and religious leaders to better safeguard them. Too often religious adherents are only seen as dangerous perpetrators of attacks whereas religious leaders can and do work in conjunction with relevant authorities on the ground to better protect them. This needs to be further encouraged and supported by practical efforts.



In a move that highlighted the significance of this meeting for the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Mission, H.E. Ambassador **Mirsada Čolaković**, head of the Mission, offered to make introductory remarks. Referring to the Bosnian experience, she acknowledged the need for greater protection of holy sites and regarded this initiative as highly important. She praised the efforts of the Inter-religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina that implemented the Universal Code pilot over the last three years and contributed to greater cooperation. She also remarked that the Mission was proud that the Bosnian experience had inspired pilots in other locations and that it was ready to give further support towards a possible UN resolution based on the Universal Code.



Sharon Rosen, co-director of the Jerusalem office of Search for Common Ground and a member of the Universal Code working group then gave a short overview of the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites; its vision, purpose, background, provisions, endorsements, challenges and future activities. She pointed out how religious identity is one of the most powerful sources in shaping attitudes and actions in a conflict zone. She also reflected on recent Pew Research that shows that 85% of the world's population define themselves in religious terms and that there is a six year high in violence and prejudice by governments and groups of faiths against other faiths during 2012. Thus religion cannot be ignored in the hope that it will go away but must be harnessed to promote peace-making.



Dr. Brian Grim, President of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation continued the theme of the role governments can play in fuelling the fire of religious tension. Until February 1st 2014, Dr. Grim was the senior researcher and director of cross-national data for the Religion and Public Life Project at the Pew Research Center. He pointed out that there has been a dramatic rise (eight times as much) in religious hostilities where governments themselves have attacked religious sites but that in general since 2007 there has been a 65% rise in religious hostilities around the world even when government restrictions have been put in place. In addition, the number of countries with attacks on holy sites has doubled since 2007. He argued that the triangular cooperation of government, business and civil society is the best way to promote religious freedom and protect holy sites.



The **Reverend Chloe Breyer** reflected on sacred space and on making memorials in such a religiously diverse country as the USA. Based in New York as the Executive Director of the Interfaith Center of New York, she highlighted the complications of the discovery of two African burial grounds in commercial New York and the conflicts and controversies around making Ground Zero a sacred space and a memorial for all the people in the city, including Muslims. She also raised concerns about the preservation of Native American holy land and pointed out that it was only a decade ago that full religious freedoms were accorded to the Native Americans in the USA. A discussion followed about two Native American tribes that piloted the use of the Universal Code over a period of two years to solve conflicts concerning sacred places and after amending the Universal Code to suit their own needs had brought it to the UN for a public joint signing.



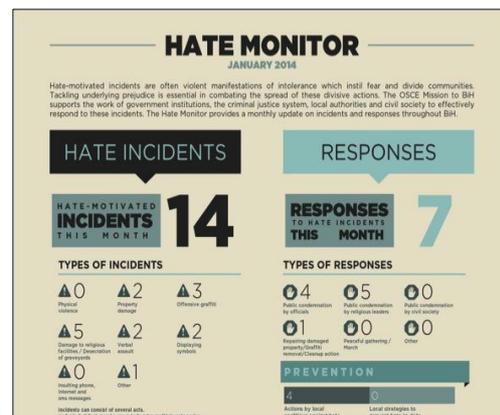
Before the coffee break, an invitee to the consultation, H.E. Ambassador to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) **Ufuk Gokcen** offered various concrete suggestions on how governments could be brought on board to promote a UN resolution based on the Universal Code. He suggested the initiative be discussed and promoted at various international meetings e.g. the Doha Interfaith meeting and that reference to last year's EU resolution on Holy Sites (16/18) could draw in EU support. He also supported the idea of a high level event under the patronage of the next President of the UN to expose the Universal Code to greater prominence.

The final presentations of the meetings were reports of pilots using the Universal Code as a tool in various countries. Emir Kovacevic, Senior Advisor to the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) in Bosnia Herzegovina and instrumental to the implementation of the successful three year pilot in that country gave a presentation on



how the IRC has combatted attacks against sacred places. Its main activities have been cooperating with the

local relevant bodies (police, municipality, justice system, media), creating for the first time a data base of attacks and analysing them, and implementing joint public condemnations by religious leaders. A 'Hate Monitor', published every month by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), reports on how many attacks have taken place and who has responded to them and how. It was interesting to note that in January 2014, religious leaders





were the only ones in Bosnia to pro-actively respond to attacks against holy sites. This provoked a lively discussion among the audience at the consultation.

Moving on to the Holy Land Sharon Rosen described the pilot taking place in the Holy Land in partnership with inter-religious councils in the Holy Land (joint Palestinian and Israeli) and in Israel. Here too a data base has been set up for the first time to monitor attacks but at the same time focus has been placed on educating for greater protection of holy sites and supporting cooperation among the relevant bodies on the ground. Here a tense but civil discussion ensued among some participants on issues of access by Muslims and Jews to the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem and the role of the media that can fan or reduce the flames on this emotive subject.

Questions were also asked about the role of the US in easing tensions and promoting peaceful negotiations in the Holy Land.

Attacks against Christian (red), Muslim (green), and Jewish (blue) holy sites from 2011 - 2013



Stein Villumstad, Secretary General of the European Council of Religious Leaders, Religions for Peace and a member of the Universal Code working group, ended this session by referring to the pilot in Indonesia that will begin in early 2014. The pilot will focus on research on and attitudes to holy sites, base line assessments, a documentary film and comic books for children. He emphasized the flexibility of the Universal Code and the possibility of developing a pilot that suits the specific needs of a country.

Minister **Knut Langeland** from the Norwegian Permanent Mission to the UN voiced Norwegian support for the initiative and offered its services on working on the language of a UN Resolution if there was resolve to adopt one in the plenary in the future.

Dr. **William Vendley** closed the consultation in a spirit of hope. He spoke of the wonderful things that can happen when religious leaders stand side by side when a holy place is being violated and how in turn their esteem grows among the people when they stand up to their convictions pro-actively as we saw in Bosnia Herzegovina. This results in a knock on effect whereby the attitudes of both the religious leaders and the people change as prejudices fade away. Tools like the Universal Code, in cooperation with policy makers and other relevant bodies, are dearly needed to protect holy sites around the world.

Conclusion

The meeting was considered successful both by the participants and the organizers. It is very unusual for UN mission representatives and others working in the field to attend a meeting outside the direct workings of the UN for over four hours. Even those few who had to leave early for other meetings, such as the OIC ambassador and the Norwegian counsellor, did not depart without addressing the group first. Two US policy makers travelled from Washington to take part in the meeting at their own cost. Most important of all the consultation has provided an important step forward in the efforts to advance governmental and inter-religious cooperation for the better safeguarding of Holy Sites.



Annex 1

Safeguarding Holy Sites

Policy Consultation

Thursday 27th February 2014

777 UN Plaza, 2nd Floor, New York City



This consultation is taking place within the framework of an international, multi-faith initiative which has resulted in the creation of a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. The overarching goal of the meeting is to deepen the awareness and understanding of policymakers regarding the significant role that religion plays in world affairs, and the reciprocal role that policymakers can play in supporting interreligious interests and cooperation to promote peace. Its specific objective is that US and international policymakers have a greater understanding of the need for systematic cooperation among political, interreligious and other relevant bodies for the better protection of holy sites worldwide.

The Universal Code working group is promoting the advancement of a UN resolution on holy sites in the spirit of the Universal Code in the belief that political support for interreligious cooperation regarding the greater protection of holy sites is an essential component in preventing sacred places from becoming pawns in times of conflict.

This consultation will bring together US policymakers, UN mission representatives and other UN bodies, academics and NGO leaders for informal discussions and constructive dialogue on the subject.

Schedule

11:30am - 12:00pm	Registration and Brunch
12:00pm - 12:30pm	Welcome – Dr. William F. Vendley, Secretary General, Religions for Peace Introductory Remarks - Ambassador Mirsada Colakovic, Permanent Representative Bosnia/Herzegovina Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites – an Overview Sharon Rosen, Co-Director, Search for Common Ground, Jerusalem
12:30pm – 1:00pm	Enhancing Peace and Security by Safeguarding Holy Sites – Trends and Possibilities Brian J. Grim Ph.D President, Religious Freedom & Business Foundation Presentation and discussion
1:00pm - 1:30pm	Holy Sites - Making Memorials after Destruction in a Religiously Diverse World Rev. Chloe Breyer, Executive Director, The Interfaith Center of New York Presentation and discussion
1:30pm - 1:45pm	Coffee Break



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1:45pm - 2:45pm

Safeguarding Holy Sites – Reports on Universal Code pilots

Bosnia Herzegovina: Emir Kovacevic, Senior Advisor, Inter-Religious Council in Bosnia Herzegovina

Holy Land: Sharon Rosen, Co-Director, Search for Common Ground Jerusalem

Indonesia: Stein Villumstad, Secretary General, European Religious Leaders, Religions for Peace

2:45pm - 3:45pm

The Road Ahead –The Role of Policy Makers: Practical Steps to Safeguard Sacred Places

Participants' discussion

3:45pm - 4:00pm

Closing