Wilton Park

Summary: The Role and Responsibility of Religious Leaders in Times of War, Atrocities and Polarisation

Monday 17 – Wednesday
19 February 2025

In partnership with
The British Embassy to the Holy See and Global Ethics

In association with
The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

With the support of
The Religion and Foreign Policy Initiative of the University of Sussex.

In partnership with

British Embassy
Holy See

Globethics

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UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

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UNIVERSITY
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Overview

Forty influential religious leaders, faith actors and peace experts met at Wilton Park from 17-19 February 2025 to discuss the **role and responsibility of religious leaders in times of war, atrocities and polarisation.**

They were drawn mainly from Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities and institutions and met against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

The partners were the UK government, through the British Embassy to the Holy See, and Globethics, with the support of The Religion and Foreign Policy Initiative of the University of Sussex and in association with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, opened the meeting noting:

"The ethical and spiritual foundations of religions and beliefs have an essential role in addressing the polarisation and conflicts that disfigure our world, and in contributing to reconciliation. There is an urgent need for religious leaders from all faiths to work

together to promote the shared, universal principles of human dignity and compassion, and to transform them into acts of solidarity."

Discussion on the limitations of faith actors to promote peace, their failures to speak out and, in some cases, their complicity in war time violence, followed. It was acknowledged that faith actors need to be more prophetic, daring to speak truth to power, instead of allowing their voice to be used as a legitimisation for ethno-nationalistic divides. There was recognition however of the courageous attitude of some faith actors, going against the dominant voices within their constituencies, crossing their communities' borders, and expressing their solidarity with all affected populations, based on integrity and common human dignity. It was also recognised that faith actors have an important role to play in preparing for peace, in rebuilding trust and in promoting healing among and between all communities. Religions have specific resources for peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation that governments do not, it was said.

Concern was expressed over the unprecedented assault on international humanitarian law, human rights and the rule of law. At the same time, some participants flagged what they saw as double standards applied, for example, to the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza. There was widespread support for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while rejecting any expulsion and ethnic cleansing.

There was a joint call for this to be a time for resetting, reframing and rediscovering the crucial role of religious leaders and faith actors in war, atrocities and polarisation. Toward that end, there was broad consensus that religious leaders and faith actors must:

1. **Recognise publicly that everyone's life is sacred**, regardless of the person's religion, belief or any other status;
2. **Challenge the political narrative of dehumanising 'the other'** by rethinking the language they use to be respectful of those in communities other than their own – as a first step in transforming attitudes of hate, mistrust and discrimination;
3. **Acknowledge the hurt and suffering of all peoples and communities** and speak up for all who have suffered;

4 **Translate 'humanising your enemy' into actions** to care for those across all communities, investing in supporting all those who are bereaved, displaced and wounded through offering practical assistance, and support cross-community activity that supports all the victims of conflict;

5 **Create innovative spaces for mediation, hope and healing** with joint ceremonies of mourning for the victims of violence and promote healing rituals for shared experiences of grieving and listening to the hurt which has been created;

6 **Work to understand the deep roots of cyclical violence** as a result of intergenerational trauma and seek to address this;

7 **Take risks on behalf of others** when they cannot take such risks themselves, including engaging in talks with those who are doing the violence and including them in a healing process;

8 **Publicly denounce all instances of hatred** that incites violence, discrimination or hostility in the name of religion or belief;

9 **Stand up for the human dignity and rights of 'the other'**, including by speaking out against ethnic cleansing and for the right of a people to live in peace in their land;

10 **Take a public stand against atrocity crimes** without resorting to double standards of support;

11 **Support the work of local grassroots faith communities** who are already engaged in cross-community peace work;

12 **Empower young people to take on leadership roles** and shape the future of peacebuilding;

13 **Engage and encourage women** to take the lead in interfaith engagement and peacebuilding to reshape authentic dialogue and contribute to facilitating an ethical leadership model based on faith and human rights;

14 **Build on local initiatives** such as the Drumlanrig Accords in the United Kingdom which aim to set a new template for Muslim-Jewish relations locally;

15 **Invest in research centres and think tanks for applied interreligious peace ethics**, and amplify the reach of faith-based texts and voices for peace, using podcasts, repositories, and other media and online appropriate channels.

16 **Combat polarisation and hate speech** on mainstream and social media, in line with international human rights standards;

17 **Counter political instrumentalisation of religions and beliefs** during and after conflicts, through preventing such manipulation, applying ethical values and reconciling divided societies;

18 **Protect and respect Holy Sites** for their powerful linkage to people's identities and for their symbolic power of generating shared connections, pilgrimages, and multifaith spiritual experiences;

19 **Work towards interreligious dialogue being more action-orientated** with a new model of interfaith engagement and peer-to-peer learning rooted in honesty, self-reflection and working towards the common good of all.

Wilton Park is a discreet think-space designed for experts and policy-makers to engage in genuine dialogue with a network of diverse voices, in order to address the most pressing challenges of our time.

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