

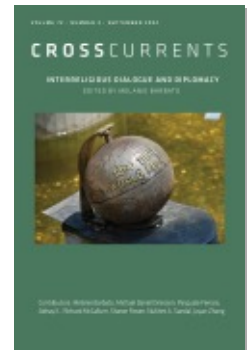


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Bridging the Divides: Interreligious Diplomacy for Effective Peacebuilding

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BRIDGING THE DIVIDES

Interreligious Diplomacy for Effective Peacebuilding

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, most Western secular societies eschewed engagement with religious actors and institutions when it comes to solving conflicts in the field of international diplomacy. Scarred by the violent conflicts of previous centuries, religion has generally been perceived as part of the problem and the marriage of religion and political power an unholy union causing great devastation and needing clear separation. Both the United States and France enshrined this separation in their constitutions, and while the queen or king remains the titular head of the Anglican Church, their purely constitutional roles ensure that religious and political power remain separate in the United Kingdom.

But the popular belief that religion is in its death throes in the face of secular, technological globalization has been challenged in recent years as states increasingly acknowledge that religion still plays a dominant role in many societies around the world. Research has demonstrated that religion is not the main cause of war,¹ but at the same time, the majority of armed conflicts have a religious dimension—and that number is growing.² The oft-quoted Pew report that more than four-fifths of the world's inhabitants identify with a religious community—with an upward projection over the next decades—was startling to many in the secular West, although it was met with less surprise in more traditional societies where religion and religious leaders play a highly significant role in people's lives and in setting social norms.³

In 2001, the shocking attacks of September 11 focused the world's attention on the role religion—or, more accurately, the abuse of religion—can play as a weapon of violent conflict. Calls for countering or preventing violent extremism, with concomitant descriptions of “religious fundamentalists and extremists,” proliferated in policy analyses as governments developed even greater numbers of security tools for

their arsenals. This, together, with the growing persecution of religious minorities in more and more countries, has tended to encourage a binary framing of religious actors as either aggressive perpetrators or victimized minorities. In turn, this objectifying of religious people and problems has influenced international policymakers' considerations on whether to engage religious actors in diplomacy to advance peacebuilding.

The above narrative is, however, being seriously challenged both by a growing number of policymakers who acknowledge the failure of present policies to curtail violence and by the increasing recognition of religious actors' potential to positively influence outcomes as part of the solution. It is also now recognized, particularly since COVID-19 has reared its ugly head and caused such mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual devastation globally, that religious leaders are often among the most trusted and influential members in communities.⁴ They provide succor, a sense of stability, and spiritual support during these uncertain times, which are likely to continue for some years. They also have multi-religious assets at their disposal, are often the first to respond to needs within their communities, and their influence can extend beyond their communities if they are provided with the skills and the opportunities to act accordingly.

RELIGION: THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION

To be clear, religion does have the power to be both a force for peace and a weapon of war. For believers, religion is an inextricable and profound part of their identity, an identity marker at the most existential level of their being, both individually and communally. Identity plays a highly significant role in the intersection between religion and conflict because when people feel that their deeply held religious identities or "their God" is under attack, they tend to withdraw into their communities, demonize the other, and find reasons to justify violence as defense of their beliefs. Religion then becomes a lightning rod that can be manipulated to galvanize people into violent conflict for their country, nation, land, community, and family.

Given the above alternative, it makes sense to engage religious actors as a force for peace, and indeed, there are already many religious leaders who are acting as an important part of the solution, rather than the problem. They work to reduce conflicts and help those suffering from violence and oppression in their communities. They also participate in the thousands of faith-based and first responder organizations around the world. The sacred texts of all religions declare peace a supreme value.

The overriding motivations that lead to violent conflict can be reduced to several very human traits and emotions: the pursuit of power, greed, selfishness, dehumanization, as well as fear, anger and past traumas. Changing that behavior requires a cultural and spiritual transformation that can be sourced in religious texts through messages that encourage caring for the vulnerable; sharing bread with the hungry; welcoming the stranger; greater awareness, betterment, and appreciation of self and other; eternal hope; and belief in human dignity as a manifestation of the divine.

However—and here comes the catch—these texts need to be internalized by adherents in their universalistic as well as personal sense; they need to be understood as applying to all people and not just members of a specific religion. That is the gauntlet that religious actors need to pick up if they are to play their role in interreligious diplomacy for peacebuilding effectively.

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND: VALUES AND ACTIVITIES

At Search for Common Ground (Search), my professional home for the past seventeen years, I have observed these changing patterns of opinions up close. While I personally have worked on religious engagement projects throughout my time at Search, the organization only began pursuing a prioritized strategic approach to engaging religious actors in peacebuilding five years ago when I was appointed as the first director of religious engagement. As the leading international organization dedicated to peacebuilding and with offices in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—locations where religion plays a significant role in people’s lives—we have naturally engaged with religious actors on locally designed and implemented projects. We could hardly have done otherwise and still be effective in our peacemaking mission. One successful project that comes to mind is the establishment, in cooperation with Morocco’s Ministry of Justice, of an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) program that blends Islamic texts with contemporary ADR techniques and that has been implemented by imams in prison services. Another initiative involved engaging religious leaders in the Central African Republic in efforts to transform violent extremism and build social cohesion.

Another project, different from the previous ones because of its global scope, is the development and implementation of a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites (Universal Code). Formulated over a period of fifteen years in collaboration with faith-based organizations and senior

religious leaders of all faiths, the Universal Code's purpose is to safeguard holy sites from attack and enable adherents to freely access and pray at their sacred spaces.⁵ Aligned with the UN's plan of action to protect holy sites,⁶ the Universal Code has been implemented in diverse locations from Nigeria to the Balkans to the Holy Land. At its heart is a peacebuilding diplomatic role religious leaders play on an issue that is of common interest to all religious adherents.

However, until recently, Search's projects with a religious component relied mostly on the local knowledge of field staff and their ability to recruit religious people among their participants. Five years ago, as opinions from some policymakers were beginning to emerge about the need to engage religious actors in reducing conflict more consciously, systematically, and with greater religious literacy, Search, a secular organization, began a journey to develop a strategic cross-cutting approach to religious engagement as a theme across the organization. The approach, based on common ground values of peacebuilding, became the foundation for a religious engagement toolkit for Search's thousand-member staff. Our aim was to learn how to be more religiously literate and confident in working with religious actors across the board, both intrareligiously and interreligiously, in order to make us more effective in reaching our peacebuilding goals.

The Common Ground Approach (CGA) to religious engagement is built on three assumptions:

1. Religious actors have the influence and knowledge to shape norms in their communities and in their societies and are members of institutions that can scale positive change. Therefore, it is vital to involve them interreligiously in peacebuilding, particularly on conflicts that have a religious dimension, if we want to be effective in reducing violence.
2. Because religion has the power to be both a force for peace and a weapon of war, engaging religious actors is essential if we want to maximize the former and minimize the latter.
3. Applying a CGA that values dialogue, collaboration, and inclusion as an accepted response to reducing violent conflict will result in effectively finding ways to reach practical win-win solutions across religious dividing lines.

When we at Search talk about "common ground values," we are referring to five foundational principles that inform our activities:

collaboration, audacity, tenacity, empathy, and results. Especially with regard to religious engagement initiatives, we focus on collaboration that includes men, women, and young people within and across religions and sectors; maintaining hope by persistently trying out new and creative paths in the face of obstacles; being nimble, adaptive, and ready for the long haul; listening deeply and offering empathy, whether we agree or not; and concretely making a difference with positive results. The similarities between the above five principles and those needed for successful diplomacy are striking.

It is important to distinguish between interreligious dialogue and interreligious diplomacy. The former is a prerequisite for the latter but can stand independently of it. Its purpose is to share spiritual and moral values, knowledge, appreciation for one's own religion and others, and interfaith relationships of trust and friendship among religious actors. There is no contradiction here with Pope Francis's encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, in which he states, "Dialogue between the followers of different religions does not take place simply for the sake of diplomacy, consideration or tolerance."⁷ However, if the purpose is specifically peacebuilding in conflict torn regions, particularly where the conflict has a religious dimension, then interreligious dialogue becomes a means towards a peaceful outcome through interreligious diplomacy.

CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS ACTORS

There are challenges, however, to working with religious actors, including the following:

Exclusion: How do you maintain values of inclusion when, for historical, social, cultural, and, in some cases, theological reasons, religions are overwhelmingly patriarchal, with men maintaining power and authority over women and young people? As with changing cultural mores, the insistence on equal human rights for peoples in all their diversity is beginning to effect change in religious communities, but the process is slow and may take generations. Conflicts around gender roles and norms in religion generally reflect the place of a society on a continuum between tradition and modernity. Religions have a tradition of studying and interpreting holy texts, so the more societies are exposed to a diversity of leadership roles and cultures, the more likely they are to interpret traditional texts in new ways.

At Search we generally use the term religious "actors" rather than religious "leaders" in order to highlight the fact that religious leaders do

not necessarily need to hold formal religious authority, titles, or qualifications, which are often unavailable to women and young people. They also include individuals in society—men, women, and youth—who exercise influence within a religious community by virtue of their standing, credibility, and activities.

Interestingly, research also suggests that “for a large and growing segment of young people, religiosity is increasingly decoupled from institutions, even as they express high levels of religious belief, practice and identity.”⁸ Over 75% of young people identify as religious or spiritual but do not identify with religious institutions. Are we now seeing a growing reaction in our societies against the fusion of religious authority with male power, similar to when religious authority is married to political power?

On a positive note, women and youth played a highly prominent role in the two Religions for Peace global meetings in Lindau, Germany, in 2020 and 2021.⁹ The Religions for Peace World Council comprises senior religious leaders from all the world’s religions, and its 2019 selection of a Muslim woman, Professor Azza Karam, as its Secretary-General reflects the winds of change.

Religious Absolutism: Similar issues arise when religious actors believe that their religion embodies the absolute and exclusive truth—that “God is on their side,” and that their interpretation of the truth is the only one. It can be difficult to bring people, in all their diversity, to the table. Interreligious diplomacy, in its essence, calls for the convening of people in conflict from diverse faiths in order to build trusting relationships. Diplomacy does not call for religious actors to surrender their beliefs for the sake of peace and harmony, but it does challenge them to examine how exclusive interpretations of religion may be detrimental to society as a whole and lead to violence. Interreligious dialogue is that first step towards diplomacy, helping people to see commonalities and joint interests amidst religious differences. Once those common interests are uncovered, they can become a launchpad for finding the solutions needed to solve conflict.

Religion and violent extremism: Despite views to the contrary, religions do not advocate violence. Religious people generally are highly sensitive to this assumed connection between religion and violent extremism and see the link as a denigration of their beliefs. They also perceive this link as going hand in hand with heightened discrimination, hate speech, and violence against entire religious communities because of the actions of

a small minority. That said, religious actors need to acknowledge that religious discourse, together with violent interpretations, can be and has been coopted by extremists who believe they are carrying out the word of God. It is difficult to envisage religious actors working effectively in the field of interreligious diplomacy if they do not recognize that extremism can emanate from their religions.

There are further challenges here; on the one hand, sensitive and appropriate language needs to be used in diplomacy when discussing violent extremism so that religious actors do not feel the need to defend their religion against attack and blame. On the other hand, religious diplomacy might indeed need the engagement of religious actors with extremist views for effective peacebuilding.

All too often we find ourselves sitting at the table with “the converted” rather than those whose beliefs can lead or have led to violent acts against others. There is a fine line between talking directly with extremists in the hope of peaceful change and legitimizing extremist discourse and action. This dilemma requires careful handling, especially as it can be extremely difficult to maintain the trust of victims of violence while also engaging the perpetrators of that violence.

Instrumentalization: Sometimes governments, policymakers, and other organizations recruit actors, particularly senior religious leaders who have international reach, on diplomatic missions in order to promote an agenda or idea. Using a political leader in such a role might make the approach too formal or publicly known, particularly if the desire is to informally sound out the views of the other side. Such a mission with religious leaders often takes place discreetly and without fanfare and can be very useful for advancing diplomatic steps in peacemaking.

However, political and religious leaders sometimes use one another for their own personal benefit and not for the good of society as a whole, perhaps to promote a specific agenda, gain resources for themselves or their community, or simply to raise a personal profile. Actions like these are counterproductive, as they do not engage the full range of religious voices which, in turn, eliminates some of the complexities and nuance of the dialogue. Bad-faith dialogues can also lower the credibility of religious leaders inside their own communities if, as a result of this instrumentalization, they take an opposing stand to their followers.

Cookie-cutter approaches: When using interreligious diplomacy as a means for peacebuilding, it is vital to know the religious context. Search is currently working on religious engagement projects in twenty

countries, and each one is a world to its own. For example, Search is a member of a consortium of secular and faith-based non-governmental organizations called The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) that is funded by the Dutch government. JISRA is an interfaith partnership that lobbies and advocates for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in seven countries, including Iraq, Indonesia, and several African countries. Its purpose is to support religious actors' capacity to engage in dialogue, to build interreligious respect for FoRB, and to further its advocacy nationally and internationally. JISRA engages in similar cross-cutting processes (such as intrareligious discussion, interreligious dialogue leading to joint action, and strengthening the voices of women, youth, and religious minorities) in all seven countries, but implementation takes on strikingly different forms in each context.

Another consideration is potential sensitivity in a particular country to focusing on religion. The words "Interreligious Freedom" or "Religious Advocacy" in the title of a project may be off-putting to certain governments and cause concomitant difficulties for the organization that proposes it. Wherever the location, there is a need for a thorough analysis of the context before engaging religious actors.

Untrained Staff: Search staff needed increased religious literacy in order to engage effectively and confidently with religious actors while aligning this literacy to the values of the organization. By "religious literacy," I refer not only to an understanding of the basic precepts of religions, as people's familiarity with religion tends to only extend to their own, but also of religious sensitivities. How does one address religious actors, use religious language codes appropriately, provide for the various religious needs of different populations, or assess when topics can be opened for discussion in intrareligious, interreligious, and cross-sectoral meetings? These are just some of many issues that must be considered. We have discovered that the need for religious literacy is not unique to Search and its staff, but rather is a necessity among policymakers, civil society practitioners, and just about anyone who is interested in effectively partnering with religious communities and organizations.

As a result of this final challenge in particular, one of my top priorities has been the development of *The Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement*, a training toolkit based on Search's foundational values that was launched in 2020 with support from GHR Foundation, and which

is freely available on Search's website in English, French, and Arabic.¹⁰ This was followed by a collaboration between Search and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) on a free online course, titled "Religious Engagement and Peacebuilding - A Common Ground Approach," which was launched through the USIP Global Academy platform in July 2021, again with GHR's support.¹¹ The course has proved extremely popular and was adapted into French and Arabic versions six months later.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Peaceful societies are those that are safe, healthy, and just; where members have their basic needs met; where beliefs and values are upheld; and where hopes and aspirations can be fulfilled. After the horrific destruction and devastation of World War II, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, attempted to create a universal standard for the protection of rights for all peoples and nations. The Declaration, adopted by the UN General Assembly, included within it the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all (i.e., the right to practice one's belief, as well as the right *not* to believe as a fundamental requisite for peaceful coexistence). At their essence, peaceful societies protect all human rights and enable diversity to flourish. When religious freedom is threatened, social cohesion suffers, and conflict grows.

Attacks on religious freedom sadly continue apace, and recent reports on Christianity as the most persecuted religion in the world have heightened awareness and freed up resources, particularly from the U.S. and other Western countries, to highlight and improve the situation.¹²

There is a trend that views the rights of religious freedom as inimical to women's, children's, LGBTQI rights or the right to freely express one's disbelief in a religion. Given the risks mentioned above regarding religious exclusionism and absolutism, this is understandable. Conversely, there are those who see the right to practice one's religion as superior to all other rights. The work on FoRB that Search implements in various conflict regions enables us to highlight the interconnection between these rights and to address intersectional concerns in a "common ground" way. By enabling religious actors to express the fears they have about the perceived breakdown of traditional religious, family, and community relationships and values—and empathizing with them—we open opportunities to explore the way different rights can be used to build peaceful societies—a common interest for all.

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND: CASE STUDIES

I will now turn to two case studies that describe the benefits and challenges of this interreligious diplomacy approach and how we have found ways to foster positive relationships and reach concrete results.

1. Kyrgyzstan: Expanding Freedom of Belief or Religion in Central Asia

Search has been active in Central Asia for more than a decade, with a flagship office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan that covers our regional programs as well as country specific activities in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. The programs focus on enabling collaborative approaches to complex issues like religious freedom, violent extremism, and strengthening inclusive societies and governance in countries that suffer from political, religious, and ethnic tensions.

As a former Soviet country, Kyrgyzstan has a complex relationship with religion and state. The communist ideals that precluded any influence of religion on state matters still find deep roots in the country, with an accompanying view that the state must regulate and control religious groups for the sake of unity and solidarity. With the resurgence of Islam after Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, encouraged and supported by outside influences, a profound level of mistrust and fear of religious extremism grew between state authorities and some religious communities with the result that the police, the judiciary, and other state instruments have maintained tight control. As the new millennium progressed, the gap between religious and secular groups widened further, with the former identifying secularism as atheism and the latter equating Islam with extremism and Protestantism with brainwashing. This gap, further exacerbated by the emergence of ISIS, accelerated the urgent need to develop clear parameters around the role of religion in the secular state. With a tenacity spanning years while using a common ground collaborative approach that includes representatives of government authorities, religious leaders and civil society organizations, Search has enabled the fostering of institutional legal reform and a more conducive environment for interreligious acceptance.

Funded by the U.S. State Department, our religious engagement work in Central Asia has generally been framed as a tool for transforming violent extremism using a collaborative methodology that builds on multi-religious and multi-stakeholder dialogue. As parties get to know one another and build trust in each other, changes at the structural level

have taken place to enshrine guarantees and protections of religious freedom within the legal framework of the Kyrgyz Republic.

In 2015, we started monitoring and evaluating current practices on religious freedom. Of the Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan is considered the most open to religious freedom, but the state has struggled to institutionalize a legal framework that ensures fair trial and judgment of cases related to religious expression and violent extremism. Such fairness is critically needed if the risks of radicalization and extremism among religious marginalized groups are to be reduced. To respond to these risks and establish greater accountability in the judicial system, Search worked with civil society representatives to monitor and document cases where religious groups' rights were violated. Search then worked with judiciary and law enforcement authorities to analyze these cases and detect patterns in violations so that the legal framework could be strengthened.

We also set up a multi-sector working group and smaller working group offshoots where representatives from the government, civil society organizations, and religions regularly met together to discuss trends in religious affairs, exchange views around pressing issues, and seek potential solutions within the legal framework. According to an independent evaluation of the project, this had never happened before due to opposing views among stakeholders and the sensitivity of the topic.¹³

The results of the monitoring laid the groundwork for the development of recommendations for strengthening the legal framework and improving enforcement practices through increased communication between the government and non-governmental stakeholders, including religious actors, on the status and legal framework of religious freedom. Using this collaborative methodology, Search also contributed to the development of the Concept in Support of the State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic on Religious Affairs for 2021–2026 (known as the State Concept), a vision paper that outlines a legal framework (laws, policies, concepts, state programs, and principles) for implementing religious freedom. This concept recommended a holistic and decentralized governmental approach, a stark contrast to previous, securitized approaches.

A practical commentary/guide to the law entitled *On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic* was also developed for judges and lawyers to avoid legal misinterpretations. The guide examines each article of the law and explains its provisions in accordance with the Constitution and is a resource to enhance understanding of

religious freedom. Seventy-eight judges participated in workshops using the guide as a key resource. Participants learned about the religious context of Kyrgyzstan as well as laws on freedom of conscience and religion and their place in the Constitution. Participants commented that they had a better understanding of wrongful sentencing and recognized the importance of thinking about people's rights before passing judgment.

The working groups also developed two other publications, one on *Human Rights for Dignified Burial* which contributed to reducing tensions around religious burials; and another which led to amendments in the law on forensic science by the Justice Ministry to include religious expertise.

Despite these efforts, discrimination based on religious grounds remains in Kyrgyzstan, with religious minority communities (e.g., Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i) facing difficulties when arranging for the burial of their dead in public cemeteries, among other issues.¹⁴ At the local level, communities are vulnerable to religious intolerance because of prejudice and stereotypes rooted in fear, misunderstanding, and distrust of the other. There is much still to be done both within Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia as a whole.

With this in mind, Search has been instrumental in the creation of a *Central Asia State Policy on Religion Learning Network* that includes cross-sectoral representation of government authorities, religious communities, and civil society organizations from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. The network has held some meetings, but there are profound differences in the levels of religious freedom among the four countries. However, if participants develop a sense of ownership, safety, and mutual trust from this cross-sectoral collaboration, the network can become an effective institutionalized mechanism for sharing best practices and addressing religious freedom issues across Central Asia.

The creation of this network is an audacious move, given the history of these four countries, and tenacity will be needed to ensure its sustainability. However, this collaborative, cross-sectoral approach, that includes representatives of religious communities playing a diplomatic role vis-à-vis one another and government authorities, seems to be an effective way of reaching constructive results peacefully. Time will tell.

2. Israel: Jewish-Muslim Interreligious Dialogue and Diplomacy

For the past several years, I have been directing a British government-funded initiative in Israel that engages Jewish and Muslim religious

actors, male and female, who after a process of mutual trust building, act as change agents for peace within their religious communities towards a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The initiative's main assumption is that, because many of the issues at the heart of the conflict have a religious dimension, it is essential to engage influential religious actors in any process to end it. Disregarding religious beliefs and community interests, or working with those disinclined to finding solutions, has fostered strong religious opposition to agreements in the past; this was the case with the failed Oslo Accords. Indeed, religious discourse continues to be used to exacerbate conflict, justify antagonism, and delegitimize narratives on both sides. Here, our aim is to do the opposite—to build a “religious language” for promoting peace based on interpretations of sacred texts and to implement activities that foster these understandings specifically, but not exclusively, within religious communities in order to create grassroots support for a negotiated peace deal. Crafting a peace accord is still the purview of the political leadership, but without the support of religious people in the region, no agreement will pass muster.

The program includes:

- Studying topics at the heart of the conflict in both intra- and interreligious groupings (e.g., Jerusalem and its holy sites, sanctity of life and land, sovereignty, and attitudes towards minorities in its midst, as well as the meaning of peace).
- Learning from influential religious leaders who have advanced peace outside the region.
- Acquiring skills in mediation and conflict resolution.
- Strengthening the voices of women as religious actors and decision-makers.
- Implementing initiatives to advance peace within religious communities including:
 - a. Creating a Muslim-Hebrew online platform Al Minbar-Habima (the Stage)¹⁵ managed by the participants with regular posts, videos and interviews.
 - b. Developing a four-part curriculum in Arabic and Hebrew on the two religions and the issues at the heart of the conflict for religious Muslim and Jewish educational institutions that is jointly presented by a Muslim and Jewish participant
 - c. Joint lectures given by duos of Jewish and Muslim participants on their project learnings to religious educational institutions

d. Local projects relevant to participants such as building community cohesion after the violence in May 2021.

Many of the religious actors are people with significant political influence and one woman who was an active participant, now has a highly influential governmental position in Israel's Knesset. The Jewish participants are predominantly from the National Religious stream who feel a profound religious attachment to the land and for the most part support a "greater Israel" approach rather than a two-state solution to the conflict. The Muslim actors are Palestinian citizens of Israel, mostly affiliated with the Islamic Movement (Southern Branch that recognizes Israel's right to exist) and are now represented in the coalition government by the Ra'am Party.

To illustrate how interreligious diplomacy works in this project, I will share a story about one of our Jewish participants. Let us call him Rabbi Joseph. He is in his forties, highly influential—both religiously and politically—and a scholar of Jewish law with hundreds of thousands of followers. Rabbi Joseph has strong religious nationalist views that stem from the belief that the Land of Israel was promised by God to the Jewish people three thousand years ago and now that circumstances have miraculously returned it to their hands, it is the Jewish people's duty to ensure it remains so.

Rabbi Joseph's interest in joining the project stemmed from the realization that his religious political party needs to come up with its own scenario for what relations between Israelis and Palestinians could look like in the future given its refusal to accept a two-state solution. During intrareligious study sessions in the first year of the project, his interpretation of texts placed ownership of the land above the holiness of life and peace, and the supremacy of Jewish life above other peoples—words that clashed with his kind, gentle demeanor.

Nevertheless, at the first interreligious meeting, Rabbi Joseph forged a bond with a learned sheikh around an Iftar dinner.¹⁶ The sheikh, a high school principal, invited the rabbi to speak to his students on religious issues. Rabbi Joseph accepted. Shortly thereafter, we took a group of thirty-four men and women, National Religious and Muslim, to Northern Ireland to build interreligious relationships and to learn lessons from that conflict from senior religious, political, educational, and law enforcement representatives. Rabbi Joseph, born in Israel, did not have a passport believing that once *in situ*, he must never leave the country.

However, after several consultations with rabbis, he applied for a passport and traveled with us. That trip was a turning point for him and many others as they listened, learned, and built relationships.

On their return, the religious actors broke into working groups to decide on what activities they would engage in to expand constituencies for peace. As part of the education group, Rabbi Joseph reported on its decision to work towards reducing violence in schools, both Arab and Jewish; to ensure that each side learns about the other's religious practices and to confront the inequalities in educational standards.

Despite religious differences and the seeming intractability of the Arab/Israeli conflict, interreligious diplomacy has power. It works particularly well with people whose religion holds profound meaning for them because religious commonalities are so easily uncovered—dedication to religious principles and practice, love of God, among others.

I could also tell the story of Aziza, a charismatic Muslim lawyer, dressed in hijab and long coat, whose harsh words against Jewish political and social oppression when we first met, ring in my ears and who, by the third year of the project had developed profound relationships with National Religious women, was presenting joint lectures to religious audiences, and was learning Shari'a law so that she had the "religious language" to discuss issues at the heart of the conflict more confidently with her Jewish counterparts.

Another engaging story is that of Noa, a young National Religious woman from Lod who gave birth to her third child three weeks before the eruption of violence in that mixed Arab-Jewish town in May 2021. Despite her fragile health and the dangerous security situation, she insisted on finding ways to sustain neighborly contact during the violence. She has become a leader in her town, regularly giving joint lectures, together with another participant of ours, a Muslim municipal leader from the neighboring mixed town of Ramleh, on the contrasting ways their towns dealt with the conflict, for good and bad, and on possible ways to build social cohesion.

The project has held on by the skin of its teeth during times of military conflict when people have left in anger and desperation, only to return later, reflecting the resilience of personal relationships. Sometimes there have been internal blow-ups, both intrareligious and interreligious, with some participants permanently leaving. Nevertheless, initial results indicate that interreligious diplomacy can change attitudes and behaviors that, over time and in large enough numbers, can contribute to the

fertile ground needed for a sustained agreement to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. This message was highlighted by one of our participants, highly influential both politically and in the public health field, who recently tweeted:

“I participated today in a festive event at the British Ambassador’s residence as a member of an interreligious project of Search that totally changed the prism of how I see the (Arab-Israeli) conflict. I am a right-wing National Religious woman but today, with motivation, I also fight for the civil rights of Arab women. There are lots of arguments but also a lot in common—and I will not give up on the commonalities.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In a recently published book titled *Interreligious Heroes*, Alon Goshen-Gottstein reflects on the traits of major interreligious actors, past and present, that “sustain the world.”¹⁸ While not a definitive list, he points to their ability to build interreligious friendships that enable transformation to occur, to them being caring human beings, flexible and stable, humble and determined, tenacious and courageous, open and curious, empathic, trusting in God and human beings, with a religious authenticity that enables authentic activity for the good of all. These interreligious heroes, men and women, young and old, are the stuff of peacemaking and model a mode of interreligious diplomacy that we must nurture and support.

NOTES

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- 2 Baumann, Finnbogason, and Svensson, “Rethinking Mediation,” 1.
- 3 Hackett, Grim, et al., “The Global Religious Landscape.”
- 4 See also the contribution by Nukhet Sandal in this issue.
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- 6 United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, “The United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites.”
- 7 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.
- 8 “The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty” (Winona, MN: Springtide Research Institute).
- 9 Religions for Peace, “1st Assembly on Women, Faith, and Diplomacy.”
- 10 The toolkit comprises an eight-module facilitator guide, participant workbook, and two PowerPoint presentations. It is available, among other resources, at Search for Common Ground’s website.
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- 12 Mounstephen, “Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review.”
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- 15 “Al Minbar-Habima,” Facebook.
- 16 Iftar is the meal that ends the daily Ramadan fast.
- 17 Meital Bonchek (@meitalbonchek), “I participated today,” Twitter, December 14, 2021, 3:17 p.m.; translated from the original Hebrew by the author.
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