

## GLOBAL NETWORK OF EXPERTS ON THE PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE TARGETS AGAINST TERRORIST ATTACKS

### EXPERT BRIEFING SERIES

#### Cooperation between Religious Leaders and the Public Sector to Protect Religious Sites against Terrorist Attacks

*Online, 19 July 2023*

*10:00 am – 11:30 am (New York time) / 4:00 pm – 5:30 pm (Madrid time)*

**Kindly register here: <https://rb.gy/fvb4b>**

#### **I - Introduction**

Regardless of goals and ideologies of specific terrorist groups, religious sites and places of worship represent attractive targets for perpetrators of terrorist groups and “lone wolves”. Attacks on sites such as mosques, churches, synagogues and shrines do not require sophisticated tactics, significant resources and expert knowledge. Large physical gatherings of worshippers, particularly for major religious holidays and processions, offer easy targets for all types of terrorists and their supporters. In addition to great numbers of casualties and wounded, these devastating acts of terrorism disrupt daily life, stoke fear and, in the case of faith institutions, they also target people’s beliefs, identities, histories and dignity.

Over the past years, terrorists have recurrently attacked religious sites around the world seeking to strike at the very core of communities’ sense of identity and belonging. Just in 2023, religious places and mass gatherings have been targeted in many countries for various reasons, including terrorism. For example, a terrorist bombing on the Peshawar Mosque in Pakistan on 30 January 2023 killed some 83 people and injured over 220. On 16 January 2023, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), Mr. Miguel Ángel Moratinos, strongly condemned all terrorist attacks on religious sites and places of worship that recently took place, including “the heinous bomb attack on a Pentecostal church in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo killing more than ten church-goers and wounding dozens,” and “the cold blooded attack on a mosque of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Burkina Faso last week killing 9 worshippers.”

In its Seventh Review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2021, the General Assembly called upon Member States to “strengthen efforts to improve the security and protection of particularly vulnerable targets, including religious sites (...) as well as to enhance their resilience to terrorist attacks, in particular in the area of civil protection”.<sup>1</sup>

As stated in [the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites](#), a multi-stakeholder approach is key to prevent, prepare and protect against potential attacks against places of worship. This should be a collective task to be pursued in a sustained and coordinated manner by relevant actors in Member States, including policymaking bodies, legislative authorities, law enforcement and emergency responders, as well as religious leaders, faith institutions, civil society groups and community members. The Plan of Action provides specific recommendations to Member States to strengthen preparedness and protection of religious sites including through partnerships with religious leaders and communities by

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<sup>1</sup> 7th Review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/75/291), paragraph 71.

building trust and cooperation, promoting respect and mutual understanding, and encouraging intra- and interfaith dialogue.

Law enforcement and faith leaders play key specific roles in ensuring the security of religious places, festivals, and processions. Religious leaders can be powerful influencers and promoters of initiatives aimed at de-escalating religious tensions, promoting counter-narratives against terrorist propaganda and hate speech which may be conducive to terrorism against faith congregations. Law enforcement agencies are essential to advise religious communities and their leaders on security planning, provide them with a security training and develop and share nationwide and local assessments of threats affecting religious sites and communities. Thus, the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites recommends establishing partnerships between law enforcement authorities and religious communities and regularly discuss with their leaders the threat landscape.

## II - Background

This Expert Briefing will be co-chaired by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), the United Nations Alliance of Civilization (UNAOC) and [United Religious Initiative](#) (URI) in the framework of the United Nations [Global Programme on Countering Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets](#).

The **United Nations Global Programme on Countering Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets** is a multi-year endeavour implemented by UNOCT in partnership with the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), UNAOC, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and in collaboration with INTERPOL. The programme seeks to strengthen Member States capacity to prevent, protect, mitigate (impact), investigate, respond to and recover from terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets at the national, regional and global levels. The programme assists beneficiary Member States to improve security and protection of their particularly vulnerable places through a balanced and comprehensive approach, in line with the Member State's requests and based on the level of preparedness and national priorities. The programme mandate covers the protection of both critical infrastructure and "soft" targets as most vulnerable places, including public events, religious sites and places of worship, tourist sites and urban centres. The Programme also considers the potential threat posed by terrorist use of UAS to vulnerable targets as one of the most pressing emerging security challenges.

The **United Nations Alliance of Civilization** (UNAOC) is an initiative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, which responds to a broad consensus across nations, cultures and religions that all societies are interdependent, bound together in their development and security, and in their environmental, economic and financial well-being. The Alliance seeks to forge collective political will and mobilize concerted action at the institutional and civil society levels to overcome prejudice, misperceptions and polarization that militate against such a consensus. It is a coalition against extremist forces; a movement to advance mutual respect for cultures, traditions and religious beliefs, and a platform to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization.

The **United Religious Initiative** (URI) is the largest global grassroots interfaith network with over 1,100 member groups, called Cooperation Circles, in 110 countries in the world. Ending religiously motivated violence has been a primary purpose of URI since it was founded in 2000. URI shares the view that religiously motivated violence, including the destruction of religious sites and sacred spaces, is a behavior that can – and must – be interrupted and prevented in order to achieve the goals of creating cultures of peace, justice, and healing. URI believes that Indigenous, religious, and spiritual leaders and actors can play an important role in communicating that violence is not something that is inevitable or acceptable, but rather something that can be prevented. In places where there are high concentrations of religion-related violence, the URI Global Support Office stands ready to help build the capacities of Cooperation Circles to stop the spread of violence in their communities and countries.

In 2021, thanks to the generous contribution of the State of Qatar, UNOCT produced [five new thematic modules with a focus on protecting particularly vulnerable sites or “soft targets”](#) as distinct types of sites worthy of a dedicated security approach. *Module 4 on Protecting Religious Sites and Places of Worship* features a comprehensive selection of case studies, good practices and recommended tools from around the world to help policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and other public and private actors to further strengthen the resilience of their places of worship. It was produced in consultation with CTED, UNICRI and UNAOC and benefited from a comprehensive review process from specialized entities of the Global Compact Working Group on Emerging Threats and Critical Infrastructure Protection. All materials are available in [English](#), [Arabic](#), [French](#) and [Russian](#) on UNOCT’s web site.

### III – Expert Briefing

The expert briefing will promote collaboration between faith communities and law enforcement agencies, identify good practices and raise awareness of benefits and importance of this multistakeholder approach to strengthen prevention, response and resilience of religious facilities and communities to terrorist threats and attacks.

**Date:** 19 July 2023

**Time:** 10:00 am – 11:30 am (New York time) / 4:00 pm – 5:30 pm (Madrid time)

#### Agenda:

- Welcome and introduction by UNOCT, UNAOC and URI (10 minutes)
- Chair and Moderator: Ms. Nihal Saad, Director, UNAOC
  - Expert presentations (45 minutes)
    - [Ambassador Mussie Hailu](#), URI Regional Director for Africa
    - Shaykh Dr. Umar Al-Qadri, Chair, Irish Muslim Peace & Integration Council (IMPIC)
    - Ms. Elizabeth Birungi, Founder of Nature Sacredness and Cultural Rights Initiative (NASACURI)
  - Q&A and discussion (20-30 minutes)

