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Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: East Africa and Beyond

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 Nairobi, Kenya

Workshop for scholars,
 policymakers, practitioners,
 and community.

Religion has frequently been viewed as a problematic aspect of peace and security in domestic and international settings. Tainted by associations with conflict, terrorism, and violent extremism, religion is frequently ignored or deliberately excluded from projects aiming to build peace, democracy, and inclusive and just societies. Yet this narrative, while pervasive, is far from the full story. Religion, in all its multifaceted complexity, makes rich and diverse contributions to the goal of realizing just and inclusive societies. Excluding religious actors and factors from analysis and policy and program development limits the options we have available for pursuing peace and, worse, allows fringe and extremist groups to grow and strengthen if unchecked.

This workshop aims to break open the conversation on religion's contribution to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, creating space to re-envision what these concepts look like in practice. It specifically focuses on the East African context, a region that has seen a marked spread of religion-linked extremist activities over the last two decades. Yet the workshop will also provide food for thought for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners from other regions.

Key questions to be explored include:

- How are religious actors involved in pursuing inclusive societies through promoting (religious) diversity and tolerance?
- What is the impact of local and international activism on the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief on intra-, inter-, and extra-religious harmony? What role can and should international agencies and instruments play in local dynamics?
- What are the contributions of religious actors to peacebuilding activities such as strengthening democracy, anti-corruption monitoring, education, and gender equality, amongst others, in the East African region?
- What are ongoing challenges and impediments to realizing inclusive, peaceful, and just societies in East Africa and what possibilities exist for tackling these challenges?

The workshop will see the presentation of initial findings from fieldwork conducted examining the role of religious actors in enhancing and facilitating tolerance, diversity and inclusion in Kenya, as part of the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) project, funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Participants will have the opportunity to comment and provide feedback on these findings and on policy recommendations to be developed from these findings.

Workshop participants will also hear from local practitioners and scholars on religion's contribution to empowering women and young people, strengthening democracy, and improving peace and security.

Background and Context of the Workshop

The “East African corridor,” extending from Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda through Tanzania, and Mozambique, has experienced a marked increase in violent extremism. While often characterised as “religious”, these extremist groups are often motivated by a complex array of political, economic, ethnic, and cultural factors, in addition to religion. Notable here is Al Shabaab, spreading from Somalia and the Islamic State (IS), continuing to make inroads in the East African region. These non-state armed groups reflect the fluid and variable nature of conflict systems today and are at the heart of some of the continent’s most enduring peace and security challenges. Recent extremism activities in Mozambique by the Islamic State in Mozambique, and the constant attacks by the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group affiliated with the Islamic State (Islamic State Central Africa Province), show the new transnational wave of religious-linked extremism in the region. The East African region has embarked on massive counterterrorism (CT), preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) frameworks, resolutions, guidelines, and practices initiated to contain and avert extremism and terrorism.

These extraordinary national security measures in their terrorism containment efforts resulted in myriad violations and abuses of fundamental human rights and principles, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. Despite the argument for legitimate demands to ensure public safety and national security, Governments have instituted stricter regulations on religious expression and the role of religion or belief in the public sphere. Amid different forms of success in violent extremism mitigation, CT and PCVE frameworks and mechanisms have further contributed to stigmatizing communities based on religious affiliations - within the purview of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) - furthering new waves of radicalization and extremism.

For countries like Ethiopia, for example, religious actors are pivotal in peacebuilding where internal conflicts are heightened under ethnic and religious banners, often politicized by political entrepreneurs. Ethnicity or religion by itself has never been a sufficient reason for conflict to arise in the country; rather, politicians try to provoke the public through their ethnic identities and religious backgrounds. Resource-based conflicts also exist in the region, often viewed under ethnic or religious cover. The recent phenomenon of destructive cults like the Shakahola cult incident in Kenya - which contributed to the deaths of more than 400 people, further heightens the role of religion and how we term ‘religiously driven violent extremism’ in the management and regulation of religious institutions. This drives the dilemma of the complications associated with the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Right to life in safeguarding national security interests.

There is the acknowledgment that religion is a strong instrument in building peaceful and just communities. Existing national and locally-led peacebuilding initiatives reveal the importance of religious engagements to advance the interests and values at the national and local levels. National governments and international donors increasingly work with religious actors to strengthen peacebuilding initiatives, including anti-corruption mechanisms, strengthening democracy, gender equality, and recognition of and protection for human rights in general, including the right to FoRB. Strategic religious engagements that utilize FoRB literacy and religious literacy show immense potential in creating and sustaining peace.

Background and Context of the Workshop

Religious engagements enable a platform to assist in understanding and working effectively with diverse religious actors to achieve development, humanitarian, and peace endeavours. Joint Initiatives for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) a partnership of 50 civil society organisations based in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda, has shown the potential of religious actors in promoting religious engagements and, building peace by helping to address issues such as poverty reduction, climate change, public health, education, corruption, preventing and countering violent extremism. JISRA is a five-year programme (2021-2025) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to further peaceful and just societies where all enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB).

Promoting the right to FoRB where no person should experience discrimination for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, is key in safeguarding other human rights. For example, when the right to FoRB is curtailed, it can deny freedom of expression, deny freedom of association by banning religious assemblies, detention without trial, impunity for attacks on places of worship, and unlawful killing. FoRB fluency can create an enabling environment for respect between religious groups and can make it harder for violent extremists to exploit local religious differences in communities. Religious literacy is an instrument for understanding not only different religions, but also understanding the diverse dimensions of religion as a socio-political phenomenon, and its entanglement with other aspects of human co-existence. Building capacity in this area has the potential to reduce suspicion and antagonism within and across religious and non-religious communities. It facilitates engagement and relationship building. When religious actors work together to develop and implement shared goals, they create mutual trust. Creating and building trust underpins the values and ethics in building sustainable, peaceful, just societies, and strengthening national and global security.

Nevertheless, religious engagements and FoRB interventions driven by external actors or by local communities are often viewed with skepticism, especially regarding the actors' or parties' motivations and interests. This skepticism is not without reason. Both FoRB and religious engagement have been criticized in scholarly literature for their potential and actual misuse and abuse to privilege the rights of some religious actors and communities over others, or for the cynical instrumentalization of religion in the pursuit of secular foreign policy goals. Such skeptical views also exist at the grassroots among recipient communities, where FoRB initiatives have been seen at times by some actors as a smokescreen for neo-colonial interventions by Global North donor governments. Further, effective religious engagement is inhibited by low levels of knowledge regarding religion and religious dynamics among government officials, security personnel, and even non-state actors working on security realms and peacebuilding efforts. Preliminary research findings also suggest that there is a blurring of "FoRB" with "religion", meaning that some members of recipient communities see FoRB not as a human right, but as an interchangeable term for religion (most often Christianity and Islam) itself. Yet we can also see terminological confusion and imprecision in discourses on "FoRB", "interfaith dialogue" and "religious engagement" within policy discourses and practice amongst Global North actors and within international institutions and forums. This highlights the urgent need for improving religious literacy and FoRB literacy in diplomacy, security, and peace-building in the East African region.

Additional Questions & Organization

Additional questions that the workshop will explore include:

- How do we understand the notion of strategic religious engagement aimed to reimagine security and peace via locally led peacebuilding efforts in the East African region?
- How do we coordinate strategic religious engagement concerning peace-building and national security priorities?
- How do we understand religious actors in the reimagining of religion in security, peace, and social transformations in the fast-changing landscapes of the East African region?
- How do we address deficiencies in FoRB and religious literacy with particular references to credibility in institutionalizing FoRB and religious literacy in religious engagements?

Organization:

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Speakers

- **Prof. Nazila Ghanea**, *Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, UN*
- **Ms. Bea Ten Tusscher**, *Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands*
- **Prof. Peter Mandaville**, *Senior Advisor for Faith Engagement, USAID*
- **Mr. Daniel Cloney**, *Senior Project Researcher, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, supporting the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief*
- **Prof. Erin Wilson**, *University of Groningen, Netherlands*
- **Bishop Willbard Kitogho Lagho**, *Bishop of Malindi, Kenya*
- **Mr. Abdirahman Ismail**, *Inter-Religious Council of Kenya*
- **Ms. Hazel Dixon**, *African Union*
- **Mr. Messaud Adem**, *Inter-Religious Council, Ethiopia*
- **Dr. Hala Al-Karib**, *Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, Sudan*
- **Dr. Halkano Wario**, *Egerton University; and Institute for Security Studies*
- **Dr. Hassan Khannenje**, *Horn Institute for Strategic Studies*
- **Prof. Fatuma Ahmed Ali**, *United States International University – Africa*
- **Dr. Patrick Mutahi**, *Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies*
- **Ms. Phyllis Muema**, *Kenya Community Support Centre*
- **Ms. Judy Kimamo**, *Search for Common Grounds*
- **Dr. Alfred Kibunja**, *African Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace*
- **Dr. Sergio Chichava**, *Institute of Social and Economic Studies, Mozambique*
- **Dr. Francis Xavier Ngatigwa**, *Augustine University, Tanzania*
- **Dr. Ashah Mwanga**, *East African Young Feminist Network, Uganda*
- **Dr. Eric Meinema**, *Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Netherlands*
- **Dr. Simon Polinder**, *Department of History of International Relations, Utrecht University, Netherlands*
- **Dr. Manoela Carpenedo**, *Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society, University of Groningen, Netherlands*
- **Dr. Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen**, *Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society, University of Groningen, Netherlands; and Technical University of Mombasa, Kenya*

DAY 1 – 5 th November, 2024	
<p>JISRA Research Validation Presentation</p>	<p>Dr. Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen (University of Groningen, RUG)</p>
<p>Panel 1: Vocabularies of Religion and Peacebuilding: Exploring the Right to FoRB, Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Engagement</p> <p><i>Panel Objective: Setting the stage on the Right to FoRB</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the major challenges when it comes to religion and peacebuilding?</i> • <i>What are key tensions in understanding, interpreting, and implementing the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief across different cultural and institutional contexts?</i> • <i>What roles are key actors playing and should they be playing in FoRB, religious engagement, and peacebuilding?</i> • <i>What are the responsibilities of local actors and how can grassroots perspectives be incorporated more in global discourses on the Right to FoRB?</i> • <i>What recommendations from East African experiences on FoRB and religious engagements be made to policymakers and project designers in other contexts?</i> 	<p>Facilitator: Prof. Erin Wilson</p> <p>(University of Groningen, RUG)</p>
<p>Panel 2: Religion, Security and Peacebuilding</p> <p><i>Panel Objective: Exploring tensions between P/CVE and promoting and protecting the right to FoRB in Kenya</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the factors to consider when determining when and if to intervene in religious groups and their activities to prevent or counter violent extremism?</i> • <i>How can these interventions be designed with the right to FoRB in mind?</i> • <i>What are the main assumptions (implicit and explicit) about violent extremism that inform Kenyan politics and security/PCVE policy?</i> • <i>To what extent have these assumptions impacted and potentially limited policy interventions?</i> • <i>What is the FoRB-PCVE nexus? How is this nexus present in intra-, inter-, and extra-religious narratives?</i> • <i>Where do intra-religious interventions end and inter-religious interventions begin?</i> • <i>What recommendations from East African experiences could be made to policymakers and project designers in other contexts?</i> 	<p>Facilitator: Prof. Fatuma Ahmed Ali</p> <p>(United States International University, Africa, USIU)</p>

Panel Outline

<p>Panel 3: Religious Discrimination, Polarization, and Peacebuilding in Africa: Cases from Kenya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Nigeria</p> <p><i>Panel Objectives: Exploring religious dynamics in politics and society in Africa</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is the role of religion in security and peacebuilding across different African contexts?</i> • <i>What is the role of religious actors, interreligious dialogue, and interreligious engagement in peacebuilding?</i> • <i>What intra-, inter- and extra-religious dynamics are significant in processes of polarization, discrimination and peacebuilding?</i> • <i>What tensions and obstacles to intra-, inter- and extra-religious engagement and dialogue exist in different African contexts?</i> • <i>What recommendations from African experiences could be made to policymakers and project designers in other contexts?</i> 	<p>Facilitator: Dr. Manoela Carpenedo (University of Groningen, RUG)</p>
<p>DAY 2 – 6th November, 2024</p>	
<p>Panel 4: Gender, Youth, and Peacebuilding: Examples from the field (Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan)</p> <p><i>Panel Objectives: Addressing intersectionalities in FoRB and Peacebuilding Interventions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How are women and youth involved in intra- and inter-religious peacebuilding projects and activism?</i> • <i>What obstacles prevent people from different minorities and marginalized groups from participating in FoRB and religious peacebuilding activities?</i> • <i>What are the different (religious) narratives and assumptions about gender roles and identities present in diverse African contexts that impede the involvement of men and women in peacebuilding projects?</i> • <i>What recommendations from East and Horn of Africa experiences could be made to policymakers and project designers in other contexts?</i> 	<p>Facilitator: Dr. Patrick Mutahi (CHIRIPS)</p>
<p>Panel 5: Overall Synthesis - The Right to FoRB and the Way Forward in Project Designing and Implementation</p> <p>Panel Objective: Capture points for an East African Policy Brief on the Right to FoRB</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapporteur comments 	<p>Facilitators: Dr. Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen, Dr. Manoela Carpenedo, and Prof. Erin Wilson (University of Groningen, RUG)</p>