

CONFERENCE REPORT
FAITH & SOCIETY WEBINAR SERIES [EP. 2]:
ENHANCING CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS IN PROMOTING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF
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<https://www.facebook.com/faithandsociety/videos/1015832618946857>

Abstract:

Speakers from different faiths discussed how faith-based institutions benefit and strengthen society. Speakers examined how international, multilateral, religious and faith-based organizations can collaborate more effectively for the common good. They also addressed how organizations promote freedom of religion or belief.

Speakers:

- Dr. Husna Ahmad, serves on the Multi-Faith Advisory Council to the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development
- Ms. Diana Ala'i, representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations in Geneva
- Dr. Ján Figel', former Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union

Q: From your perspective what role do international organizations play in promoting freedom of religion or belief and likewise what role does civil society play in promoting it?

Diana Ala'i,

Ms. Ala'i stated that international organizations are responsible for reporting violations of freedom of religion or belief. It is a critical role because such organizations channel ideas about religious liberty and can advocate them to governments and institutions. She continued by stating that without civil society, there would be no awareness about the circumstances on the ground to promote and safeguard religious liberty or belief. Civil society has a critical role to play in calling the attention of UN Special Envoys, as well as international organizations and advocating for religious freedom and belief. Civil society also plays an important function in framing the concern of freedom of religion or belief and providing insights into some of the material of both the UN Declaration of Human Rights and reports.

Jan Figel

Dr. Figel responded by stating that human dignity is an important principle of all human rights and is a fundamental notion that recognizes individuals' immeasurable worth. It is crucial to recognize our identity because, while people have different identities, all are equal in dignity. He argued that individuals should be proactively committed to upholding human dignity even in the toughest of circumstances. Only then can the global society work towards peace, justice, and long-term progress.

In addressing the role of civil society in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief, he stated that civil society is united by shared values, common goals, and a sense of stability and protection. Today's civil society is founded on the rule of law, rights and responsibilities, civic participation and meaningful engagement.

Dr. Husna Ahmad

In Dr. Ahmad's response, she stated that a number of international organizations play an important role. For example, UNESCO and its wonderful work on world heritage sites, as well as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, are accomplishing an incredible job in pulling religious leaders and political judgements together. She emphasized the importance of civil society as she believes its role in the promotion of the freedom of religion or belief breaks barriers among individuals and groups of people and allows for greater interaction and collaboration among people of different faiths.

Q: What particular effective examples have you seen of civil society engaging with international organizations in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief?

Jan Figel

Dr. Figel stated that partnership is one of the best practices in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief. Non-governmental or government organizations should have autonomy and the beneficial element of sitting and working together in order to form a partnership. Partnership and win-win values are key to such partnerships. For example, the traditional association that they organize every year in Brussels, primarily the European Development Days, brings many nations together, including all EU member states and European Union entities. Government partners from the ACP region and others join forces with civil society groups, domestic or international platforms, and the media for a two- to three-day meeting to share discourse offering the best practices in forming joint ventures, coordinating forums, and taking valuable actions and decisions toward the common goal of sustainable development. He emphasized action from these partnerships in helping the victims and prosecuting the perpetrators.

Diane Ala'i

Ms. Ala'i provided two examples of civil society engaging with international organizations in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief. Cooperation, namely with the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and a project called "Faith for Rights" that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has undertaken. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief gathers information from civil society on international visits. This is critical given the weight of the special processes to obtain information from civil society. In addition, it gives dialogues on thematic findings and provides opportunity for rapporteurs to hold discussions on their reports, allowing civil society to contribute. The "Faith for Rights" project focuses on how different religions can promote the same ideas that are in their scriptures. The purpose is for religious people to be supported and urged to uphold Human Rights through their own religious beliefs.