

‘Faith for Rights’ in Armed Conflict: Lessons from Practice

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Abstract

This article examines how the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on ‘Faith for Rights’ have been implemented in practice since 2017. It focuses on case studies from Afghanistan, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and hypothetical ‘cases to debate’ of the #Faith4Rights toolkit. The latter provides a peer-to-peer learning methodology to share the experiences of faith-based actors in dealing with tensions among human rights and in addressing armed conflicts across the globe.

The 2017 Beirut Declaration, and the underlying 2012 Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of incitement to hatred, acknowledge the positive or negative roles of religious leaders and their responsibilities during armed conflict and beyond. These declarations have been considered soft law instruments since they are regularly referred to in reports by the United Nations Secretary-General, High Commissioner, Special Rapporteurs, Treaty Bodies, the European Union and the Council of Europe. Furthermore, social media companies and Meta’s Oversight Board use the Rabat threshold test when making content moderation decisions on Facebook and Instagram, including in situations of armed conflict or in regions that have a recent history of conflict.

This article concludes that the #Faith4Rights toolkit provides a rights-based approach for bringing together the two worlds of faith and human rights. Its peer-to-peer learning methodology seeks to reflect and facilitate measurable changes rather than focusing only on inter-religious dialogue as such. It also provides concrete guidance to the—often daunting—task for facilitators of peer-to-peer learning events and for mediators in an armed conflict.

Keywords: Beirut Declaration; #Faith4Rights toolkit; human rights; international humanitarian law; religious leaders.

1. Introduction

Human rights are closely connected to religion, security and peace. Religious leaders play a crucial role in either defending human rights, peace and security—or, unfortunately, in undermining them. Supporting the positive contributions of faith-based actors is crucial, as is preventing the exploitation of religious faith as a tool in conflicts, or as interpreted to deny people’s rights (Bachelet 2019a).

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Conflicts are the ultimate testing moment for our values, laws, institutions and leadership. The above quote by the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet during the 2019 Global Summit on Religion, Peace and Security encapsulates the fundamental choices related to the role and human rights responsibilities of religious leaders and faith-based actors before, during and in the aftermath of armed conflict. On the one hand, their role can be very detrimental, as evidenced by cases of incitement to hatred, discrimination, violence or even atrocity crimes in the name of religion. On the other hand, there are numerous examples where faith-based actors have contributed to preventing an escalation of violence due to their courageous interventions, joint activities or remedial speech.

In this context, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has been working for several years with faith-based actors to conceive the 'Faith for Rights' framework, upholding the dignity and the equal worth of all human beings as well as fostering the development of peaceful societies through outlining concrete human rights roles and responsibilities. In March 2017, several faith-based and civil society actors as well as UN Special Rapporteurs and Treaty Body members adopted the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on 'Faith for Rights' as a tailored narrative which articulates 'a shared vision of our responsibilities and transcend[s] preaching to action' ([Beirut Declaration 2017](#): 6).

This article aims at sharing some lessons from practice in implementing the 'Faith for Rights' framework over the past five years in order to prevent or resolve (armed) conflicts. It first outlines the Beirut Declaration's legal scope and its peer-to-peer learning methodology as developed in the #Faith4Rights toolkit (chapter 2). This article then examines some related case studies from Afghanistan, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the hypothetical 'cases to debate' of the #Faith4Rights toolkit (chapter 3). It continues by illustrating how reports and resolutions by the United Nations and regional inter-governmental bodies have been using the 'Faith for Rights' framework and toolkit as soft law instruments (chapter 4). Finally, the article explores how interfaith dialogues can produce concrete results leading to sustainable impact by adopting the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the #Faith4Rights toolkit (chapter 5).

2. The 'Faith for Rights' framework

2.1 Scope of application of the Beirut Declaration

The Beirut Declaration emphasizes that '[r]eligious communities, their leaders and followers have a role and bear responsibilities independently from public authorities both under national and international legal instruments' ([Beirut Declaration 2017](#): 18). These responsibilities are legally grounded in the prohibition of advocating religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence pursuant to article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as the prohibition of discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons or person on the grounds of religion or belief pursuant to article 2(1) of the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. These general legal obligations needed specific attribution of responsibilities for non-State religious leaders and faith-based actors.

Like all human rights standards, the 'Faith for Rights' framework applies both in times of peace and conflict. With regard to armed conflict, the Beirut Declaration notes that, by analogy, 'the notion of effective control provides the foundation for responsibilities of non-State actors in times of conflict', quoting the CEDAW Committee ([Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 2013](#): 16) and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief ([UN Human Rights Council 2014](#): 54–55) to support the statement that '[u]nder certain circumstances, in particular when

non-State actors exercise significant/effective control over territory and population (e.g. as *de facto* authorities), they are also obliged to respect international human rights as duty bearers' (Beirut Declaration 2017: 19). In addition, leaders of an official State religion are duty-bearers of the State's human rights obligations and they may also trigger responsibilities under the draft articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (International Law Commission 2001), including for their conduct as an organ exercising legislative, executive, judicial or any other functions (article 4), or as a person or entity which is empowered by the law of the State to exercise elements of the governmental authority provided they are acting in that capacity in the particular instance (article 5).

The Beirut Declaration emphasizes that freedom of thought and conscience precedes all freedoms for they are linked to the deepest essence of everybody's right to fundamental choices related to religion or belief in the internal sphere (*forum internum*). As highlighted in the corresponding 18 Commitments and the #Faith4Rights toolkit, article 18 of the ICCPR 'does not permit any limitations whatsoever on freedom of thought and conscience, which are absolutely protected under international human rights law, covering all ethics and values a human being cherishes, whether of a religious nature or not' (UN Human Rights Council 2022: 8).

Thus, the terminology '*Faith* for Rights' (emphasis added)—instead of the possible alternative title '*Religions* for Rights'—was purposely designed in Beirut to reflect the broad definition of religion or belief in international human rights law, which equally protects 'theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other believers' (Salama and Wiener 2022: 100). This formulation may sound counter-intuitive to the general public, however, it is of great practical protection value in terms of conflict prevention and management as well as post-conflict reconciliation since it includes not only theistic believers but also agnostics, animists, atheists, free thinkers, humanists, secularists and non-theistic believers. The international community owes it to human rights mechanisms, as this wide and inclusive definition emanates from the UN Human Rights Committee's general comment on freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which stresses that article 18 of the ICCPR 'is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions' (UN Human Rights Committee 1993: 2).

2.2 From aspiration to implementation

How can the aspirational aims and attitudes of faith traditions towards equal human dignity, goodness, compassion and harmony translate into concrete action? And how to ensure protection for those faith-based actors, who suffer discrimination, receive threats, or risk being abducted or killed because they dare to speak out against non-State armed groups, as illustrated in a UN report about attacks against places of worship, religious leaders and worshippers (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2017)? The answer of faith-based actors, in the Beirut Declaration on 'Faith for Rights', is the following:

[W]e are resolved to challenge the manipulation of religions in both politics and conflicts. We intend to be a balancing united voice of solidarity, reason, compassion, moderation, enlightenment and corresponding collective action at the grassroots level ... Speaking with one voice, particularly against any advocacy of hatred that amounts to inciting violence, discrimination or any other violation of the equal dignity that all human beings enjoy regardless of their religion, belief, gender, political or other opinion, national or social origin, or any other status. Denouncing incitement to hatred, injustices, discrimination on religious grounds or any form of religious intolerance is not enough. We have a duty to redress hate speech by remedial compassion and solidarity that heals hearts and societies alike. Our words of redress should transcend religious or belief boundaries. Such

boundaries should thus no longer remain a free land for manipulators, xenophobes, populists and violent extremists ([Beirut Declaration 2017](#): 10).

Such an intended paradigm shift from denouncing hatred to remedying its origins through collaborative interfaith action is of strategic value, particularly in situations that are likely to degenerate from tension to armed conflict. Operationalizing this shift requires empowering faith-based actors with relevant interdisciplinary knowledge and adapted tools to engage concerned communities and individuals. This is the main aim of the 'Faith for Rights' framework and its peer-to-peer learning methodology.

Faith-based actors have gained important experiences and learned lessons when dealing with situations of tension, including among human rights or between human rights and some interpretations of certain religious texts. The #Faith4Rights toolkit, which was launched in 2020 and piloted for two years, tries to address these issues concretely and pragmatically in a peer-to-peer learning mode that aspires to share the richness of faith actors' experiences with both intercommunal tensions and larger conflict situations within and among countries across the globe. The toolkit suggests a menu of exercises applicable at both inter-religious and intra-religious levels. These exercises ultimately aim at facilitating respectful critical thinking into the religious sphere. Suggested exercises include discussing the role of religions in times of conflict, religious wars in history and their residual implications up to our recent times, and highlighting the importance of objective research to establish historical facts with a view to preventing recurrence of conflict ([OHCHR 2023](#): 56). They appear in the context of commitment X of the 'Faith for Rights' framework, which pledges not to tolerate exclusionary interpretations on religious grounds that instrumentalize religions, beliefs or their followers to incite hatred and violence. While it may be utopian to believe in the possibility of totally delinking religion and politics, it is certainly both necessary and feasible to define parameters for countering the political manipulation of religions that causes harm to both sides of the equation and compromises human rights by distorting free and informed choices.

Furthermore, as manipulation is a two-way road that is deeply rooted in human nature, commitment XV pledges 'neither to coerce people nor to exploit persons in vulnerable situations into converting from their religion or belief, while fully respecting everyone's freedom to have, adopt or change a religion or belief and the right to manifest it'. This formulation brings together the right of conversion and the prohibition of coercion as enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 18 of the ICCPR. In this regard, the #Faith4Rights toolkit proposes a storytelling exercise ([OHCHR 2023](#): 73) where participants discuss cases of coercion to change one's religion, such as the forced conversions of members of the Yezidi minority community who were held by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq's Nineveh province. In this context the toolkit also refers to a joint urgent appeal sent by seven Special Procedures mandate-holders in May 2015 to the government of Iraq ([UN Special Procedures 2015](#)).

In addition to countering manipulation in the name of their belief systems, faith actors have also introduced their positive individual and collective commitment 'to leverage the spiritual and moral weight of religions and beliefs with the aim of strengthening the protection of universal human rights and developing preventative strategies that we adapt to our local contexts' ([18 Commitments 2017](#): XVI). While religions are often manipulated in conflict situations, the #Faith4Rights toolkit highlights that 'faith actors are powerful agents of peacebuilding and reconciliation in post conflict situations' and that they are 'best placed to prevent or counter such manipulation in the name of their own religion or belief' ([OHCHR 2023](#): 75). Again, one of the peer-to-peer learning exercises of the #Faith4Rights toolkit suggests discussing the role of faith actors in armed conflicts and in enhancing compliance with international humanitarian law ([OHCHR 2023](#): 78), referring to a related article ([Cismas and Heffes 2017](#)) and the High Commissioner's statement at

the Security Council Arria-formula meeting on 'Advancing the safety and security of persons belonging to religious minorities in armed conflict' (Bachelet 2019b). Useful strategies can include peer pressure, peer cooperation and peer learning between States, non-State armed groups, religious leaders, faith-based actors and UN human rights mechanisms, as highlighted during the roundtable with Religions for Peace Secretary-General Azza Karam and Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed at the Generating Respect Project Conference on Human Rights Day 2021 (OHCHR 2023: 78).

The #Faith4Rights toolkit also refers to the report on 'IHL and Islamic Law in Contemporary Armed Conflicts', in which the ICRC President Peter Maurer stressed the importance of engaging in constructive dialogue with cultural and religious actors on working together in order to uphold international humanitarian law, and thus prevent violations and protect communities (Aldawood 2019: 8). In a similar vein, the IHL resolution adopted at the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent stressed that the basic value of respect for human dignity in times of armed conflict was not only enshrined in IHL but also in the rules and principles of different faiths or traditions, and the resolution explicitly recognized 'the importance of dialogue among relevant actors and ongoing efforts in this respect' (Red Cross and Red Crescent 2019: 2).

3. Case studies from the #Faith4Rights toolkit

With a view to illustrating how the 'Faith for Rights' approach has been implemented (or not) in practice, we will examine some case studies from Cyprus, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as the hypothetical 'cases to debate' of the #Faith4Rights toolkit.

3.1 Cyprus

The #Faith4Rights toolkit provides a compelling example that was raised by the former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, with regard to a breakthrough in inter-faith communication achieved by religious leaders in Cyprus (OHCHR 2023: 79). While the frozen Cyprus conflict is not per se a religious conflict, the Special Rapporteur stressed that all cooperation between the religious leaders had stopped when the bi-communal conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots escalated in the 1960s. Therefore, the 2013 agreement that allows Muslim and Greek Orthodox religious leaders, who had previously been stop-listed, to cross the Green Line which divides the island, has been called by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief 'a huge leap for the religious communities concerned' (Bielefeldt 2013). In this context, the Special Rapporteur's mandate and OHCHR have been cooperating over the past decade with the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, which was established under the auspices of the Embassy of Sweden in Nicosia, in order to encourage, facilitate and serve the religious leaders' dialogue and efforts for religious freedom and peace in Cyprus and to contribute positively and constructively to the Cyprus peace talks.

The Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process has translated the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on 'Faith for Rights' into Greek and Turkish, using them for awareness-raising campaigns on social media, collaboration with educators and journalists as well as cross-disciplinary dialogue on human rights across the island (UN Human Rights Council 2019: 41). In his report to the Security Council, the UN Secretary-General also referred to a round table organized in 2017 by the Religious Track and OHCHR with leaders and representatives from 16 religious groups and civil society organizations about the 'Faith for Rights' framework, which recognizes 'religious or belief convictions as a source for the protection of the whole spectrum of inalienable human entitlements' (UN Security Council 2018: 27). The Religious Track also organized a 'Faith for Rights' seminar on the role that faith actors could play in combating human trafficking and supporting victims,

in a follow-up to the 2017 statement of the religious leaders of Cyprus condemning all forms of violence against women and girls. They also collaborated for creating a pilot home unit in Nicosia for unaccompanied children, including survivors of human trafficking (UN Human Rights Council 2023a: 60).

In 2021, the Office of the Religious Track participated in the European Regional Forum on conflict prevention and the protection of the human rights of minorities, which specifically recommended promoting inter-religious dialogue, including between religious leaders to make the majority religious group understand the plight of the minority and advocate together the rights of the minority (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2021: 22). The subsequent global Forum on Minority Issues encouraged States, the United Nations, international and regional organizations as well as civil society to work closely in supporting the positive contributions of faith-based actors, including through promoting the Beirut Declaration and the #Faith4Rights toolkit (UN Human Rights Council 2021a: 58). Part of this formulation was also used by the UN Human Rights Council in its resolution 49/9 on prevention of genocide as well as in the Special Rapporteur's thematic report on landscaping freedom of religion or belief (UN Human Rights Council 2023b: 7 and 81). This shows how local experiences of faith actors may successfully trickle up to the regional and global levels, bringing together peer-to-peer learning and multilateral diplomacy.

3.2 Afghanistan

Another case study—albeit with a less positive impact so far—is the human rights engagement with the *de facto* authorities in Afghanistan. Already in early 2001, the former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Abdelfattah Amor, had sent two urgent appeals to the Taliban, asking them to protect religious minorities and to halt the destruction of monuments such as the Buddhist statues of Bamayan, which however were subsequently smashed (UN General Assembly 2001: 25–30). After the Taliban took again control of the country two decades later, in August 2021, the High Commissioner asked States during the UN Human Rights Council's special session on Afghanistan to use their influence with the Taliban to encourage respect for all human rights and she suggested that Islamic-majority countries in particular share their successful experiences of implementing international human rights norms in their cultural and religious contexts (Bachelet 2021). On 24 August 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Reem Alsalem, stressed that any party in Afghanistan declaring it follows Islamic Sharia must uphold and protect the rights of women and girls. The #Faith4Rights toolkit also quotes in its module 5 on gender equality the following statement by Reem Alsalem:

According to the *Quran*, no one has the right to impose religion, including religious law, on anyone else (verse 2:256). This egalitarian approach to religious authority has found expression in the rich plurality and diversity of religious understanding and schools of jurisprudence (*madhabib*) which we have till today. Notably, women, like men also have an equal right and responsibility to interpret Sharia. It would be important that this rich diverse heritage would be allowed to continue all over the Muslim World, including in Afghanistan (Alsalem 2021).

Furthermore, Special Rapporteur Alsalem noted that '[b]y imposing their beliefs on the wider Afghan public, the Taliban are denying those that do not believe in them their own individual freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which is a fundamental human right' (Alsalem 2022). With regard to gender-based violence and alleged attacks targeting the religious and ethnic minority of the Hazara, she and two other Special Rapporteurs also sent a joint communication to the *de facto* authorities on 4 November 2021, while stressing that their letter 'does not imply the expression of opinion concerning the legal status of any territory in Afghanistan, city, or area, or of its authorities' (UN Special

[Procedures 2021](#): 8). Their joint communication contained in its standard Annex various references to international human rights and humanitarian law, but also included an additional Annex II, entitled 'References to relevant Islamic Principles that converge with International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law Obligations'. Both Annexes explicitly referred to the Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments on 'Faith for Rights', with a view to 'supplement the capacity of all stakeholders to engage in dialogue to consolidate the observance of the international human rights obligations of Afghanistan' ([UN Special Procedures 2021](#): 13–17). Drawing on the support of eight trained Islamic jurists who live in six different countries, the UN Special Rapporteurs noted 'many points of convergence between Islamic teachings and understandings and human rights obligations of states' (ibid. 16).

At the time of finalizing this article, the Taliban have not replied to the Special Procedures' joint communication of 4 November 2021. However, Richard Bennett, the newly appointed Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, was able to meet in May 2022 with the Taliban, who assured him 'that they will respect the international human rights treaties ratified by Afghanistan, albeit as far as consistent with Sharia law'. Moreover, as noted by Special Rapporteur Bennett in his end-of-mission statement,

The authorities acknowledged that, from their perspective, the vast majority of international human rights norms are compatible with their understanding of Sharia. While there are some contentious issues where further dialogue is needed, they are urged to fully implement the human rights standards which Afghanistan has freely accepted, including respecting the rights of girls and women to education, employment, and participation in public life ([Bennett 2022](#)).

It remains vital to interact with the *de facto* authorities with clear messages based on a human rights-based approach, as well as to continue support and advocacy of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. When former High Commissioner Bachelet visited Kabul in March 2022, she had meetings with representatives of the *de facto* authorities and in her subsequent press statement she stressed that

[e]very society is more sustainable and peaceful if human rights are respected and all the people of the nation are represented, including religious and ethnic minorities and in particular those who have historically faced discrimination, marginalization and violence' ([Bachelet 2022](#)).

Furthermore, eight Special Procedures mandate-holders and two UN treaty bodies (Committee on the Rights of the Child and CEDAW Committee) stressed in a joint press release that '[a]ccording to international law, a party may not invoke provisions of its domestic law, including those based on religious doctrine, as a justification for its failure to perform a treaty and to perpetuate discrimination' ([UN Special Procedures/Treaty Bodies 2022](#)). In March 2023, High Commissioner Volker Türk updated the UN Human Rights Council that the 'repression of women in Afghanistan is unparalleled, contravening every established belief system' ([Türk 2023](#)).

International norms and universal standards are the only legally binding framework in terms of States' accountability under human rights law and international humanitarian law. However, whenever religious-based legal regimes, or religious interpretations at large, are invoked in a manner that contradicts international law, using the 'Faith for Rights' framework provides a unique angle of protection of universal norms through engaging religious actors on the grounds of faith for rights. Emphasizing the commonalities between faith traditions and universal norms does not compromise on but rather enhances the latter.

3.3 Democratic Republic of Congo

As another case study, the #Faith4Rights toolkit briefly refers to a UN report on hate speech in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which documented allegations of hate speech in 15 of its 26 provinces in 2020. As one of the factors contributing to hate speech, the report identified the weak formal institutional framework for the peaceful management of land and inter-community conflicts, particularly in ten provinces affected by armed conflict ([UN Joint Human Rights Office in the DRC 2021](#): 10). The report analysed these hate speech cases according to the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence ([Rabat Plan of Action 2012](#)). Its six-part threshold test considers (1) the social and political context, (2) status of the speaker, (3) intent to incite the audience against a target group, (4) content of the speech, (5) extent of its dissemination, and (6) likelihood of harm, including imminence. In this context, the #Faith4Rights toolkit suggests a peer-to-peer learning exercise to identify when freedom of expression within the theological discourse enters into a grey zone that may reach the threshold of advocacy to hatred that could constitute incitement to violence ([OHCHR 2023](#): 49).

The UN report on hate speech in the Democratic Republic of the Congo noted that political and religious leaders have an important position or status in society and thus their statements may increase the risk of discriminatory, violent or hostile acts. The report's recommendations explicitly refer to the 'Faith for Rights' framework, notably its commitment VI (on minority rights) and commitment VII (on incitement to hatred), by recommending that political and religious actors should:

92. Firmly and immediately denounce intolerance, discriminatory stereotypes and advocacy of hatred that incites violence, discrimination or hostility, including those that lead to atrocity crimes.

93. Affirm that violence cannot be justified by prior provocation.

94. Protect the rights of all persons belonging to minorities, including their right to equal and effective participation in cultural, religious, social, economic, and public life, per international human rights law ([UN Joint Human Rights Office in the DRC 2021](#): 92–94).

In April 2022, the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo called upon political and religious leaders to refrain from hate speech and to contribute to positive intercommunal relations; two months later, a related workshop in Kinshasa helped in developing a regional strategy to counter hate speech and incitement to hostility ([UN Human Rights Council 2023c](#): 31).

3.4 Hypothetical cases to debate

In addition to these real-life case studies, the #Faith4Rights toolkit also includes in its annex seven short hypothetical cases to debate in peer-to-peer learning or conflict management sessions for faith-based actors. Furthermore, the annex features six more detailed moot court cases, which are designed for training the written and oral pleading skills of law students or school pupils. Each of these hypothetical cases alludes to, or even explicitly refers to, the 'Faith for Rights' framework. For example, the 2020 hypothetical case of the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court Competition (Annex K) is situated in a post-civil war context, involving a controversy about religious symbols and protests using the hashtag #Faith4Rights ([World Moot 2020](#): 30). Furthermore, its 2022 case refers to the plight of refugees, some of whom were allegedly coerced into converting away from their religion in an immigration camp, which in the scenario triggered a tweet that everyone should carefully read the #Faith4Rights toolkit ([World Moot 2022](#): 28). Finally, the 2022 case of the Price Media Law Moot Court Competition quotes the 18 Commitments on 'Faith for Rights', which include the pledge not to instrumentalize religions, beliefs or their

followers to incite hatred and violence, for example for electoral purposes or political gains (Price Moot 2022: 34).

When piloting the #Faith4Rights toolkit in peer-to-peer learning events with faith-based actors, civil servants and judges in different countries, it proved to be very useful to discuss such hypothetical cases and engage with the participants about their own experiences and perspectives. The case studies are provided in the #Faith4Rights toolkit on indicative basis and could be adapted to different circumstances, based on the objectives in each context. While the toolkit's case to debate on hate speech by political and religious leaders in the context of an epidemic (Annex G) was designed as a hypothetical scenario, one of the participants asked why the #Faith4Rights toolkit had invented some 'funny names' for the States and religions in this scenario, whereas a similar case had apparently happened in the participant's district (Salama and Wiener 2021: 370). Such feedback from this specific peer-to-peer learning event shows how hypothetical scenarios may intersect with the lived reality of the participants, which can facilitate constructive discussion on sensitive cases. This may even hopefully also lead to subsequent reforms in national laws and practice.

4. Emerging soft law standards

Concerning the multilateral level, it has been argued that any normative gaps related to religion in international hard law norms should 'best be addressed incrementally through soft law standards' (Salama and Wiener 2022: 30). The Beirut Declaration and its 18 Commitments have been considered 'as – potentially – behavior-affecting soft law or at least as "softish law" in the making' (Bielefeldt and Wiener 2020: 179). The former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, highlighted for example that the High Commissioner's 2018 report on the situation of human rights of Rohingya people called upon the government of Myanmar to 'increase efforts further to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence in all sectors of society', in line with the Rabat Plan of Action and Beirut Declaration, which 'illustrates the complementarity and practical usefulness of these soft law standards' (UN General Assembly 2018: 63). The UN Human Rights Council picked up the related recommendation in its annual resolutions 43/26, 46/21 and 49/23 on the situation of human rights in Myanmar. The Special Rapporteur labelled the Rabat and Beirut standards as 'soft law instruments developed under the auspices of the United Nations', in line with States' obligations to prohibit any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (UN Human Rights Council 2021b: 79(d); see also UN General Assembly 2019: 73). His mission report on Sri Lanka also recommended drawing on the Beirut Declaration in activities designed to promote inter-religious dialogue and foster pluralism (UN Human Rights Council 2020: 92(a)). Special Rapporteurs quoted them in allegation letters to States and *de facto* authorities as well as in the updated framework for communications and the Rapporteur's Digest (UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief 2023).

Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Committee explicitly refers in its general comment no. 37 to the Rabat Plan of Action and Beirut Declaration, stressing that participation in assemblies whose dominant message falls within the scope of article 20 of the ICCPR must be addressed in conformity with the requirements set out by freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly (UN Human Rights Committee 2020: 50). The Committee also emphasizes that freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a non-derogable right, and that the Covenant continues to apply in a situation of armed conflict (UN Human Rights Committee 2020: 96–97). Such cross-referencing between various human rights mechanisms may lead to cross-fertilization among different soft law standards (UN Audiovisual Library of International Law 2021: 5; Salama and Wiener 2022: 109). This ultimately facilitates coherent jurisprudence that enlightens States' practice and enhances the positive role of non-State actors, including in the religious sphere, which can immensely benefit from both critical thinking and interdisciplinary approaches. Good practices promoted through

such a peer-to-peer learning methodology are conducive to even better practices with a view to generating greater compliance by religious leaders and faith-based actors with international human rights law and IHL (Cismas and Heffes 2020).

At the regional level, the European Union's Gender Action Plan III explicitly calls on the EU to 'support mobilisation of religious actors for gender equality in line with the Faith for Rights framework' (European Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2020: 3). Furthermore, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted on 20 May 2022 its recommendation to member States on combating hate speech, which relies on the six criteria of the Rabat Plan of Action. The Committee of Ministers recommends ensuring that human rights education, education for democratic citizenship as well as media and information literacy are part of the general education curriculum, and in this regard the Council of Europe's explanatory memorandum comments that the UN 'Faith for Rights' Framework and Toolkit is a useful tool with its peer-to-peer learning methodology (Council of Europe 2022: 184).

Not only regional organizations and States, but also non-State actors such as social media companies have been using the Rabat threshold test. For example, Meta has recognized its responsibilities to respect human rights under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and indicated that it looks to authorities like the ICCPR and the Rabat Plan of Action when making content moderation decisions on Facebook and Instagram, including in situations of armed conflict. Meta's Oversight Board also considered various international human rights standards, including the Rabat Plan of Action, in several decisions, notably in its case 2020-003-FB-UA ('Armenians in Azerbaijan'), which upheld Facebook's decision to remove a slur posted online shortly before a ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in November 2020. The majority of the Oversight Board viewed Facebook's removal of the post as necessary and proportionate to protect the rights of others, stressing that '[d]uring an armed conflict, the risks to people's rights to equality, security of person and, potentially, life are especially pronounced' (Oversight Board 2021). Furthermore, in its decision 2022-001-FB-UA ('Knin cartoon'), the Oversight Board focused on several factors of the Rabat Plan of Action, that is the social and political context, intent, the content and form of the speech as well as the extent of its dissemination. Meta's original decision to leave up a post on Facebook, which depicted ethnic Serbs as rats overrunning the Croatian city of Knin in an edited video, was overturned by the Oversight Board since the post 'may contribute to a climate where people feel justified in attacking ethnic Serbs' and because it was 'designed to remind people of past conflict and to rekindle ethnic strife' (Oversight Board 2022a). In its decision 2022-006-FB-MR ('Tigray Communication Affairs Bureau'), the Oversight Board upheld Meta's removal of a post threatening violence in the conflict in Ethiopia. Using each of the six factors of the Rabat threshold test for its analysis, the Oversight Board noted that it took Meta two days until the content was removed, which 'in the context of an armed conflict, is a considerable time span given the Rabat assessment outlined above' (Oversight Board 2022b). These are important findings which may have significant impact for online content moderation decisions across the globe, especially in view of almost 3 billion monthly active users of Facebook at the end of 2022 (Meta 2023).

5. Concluding remarks

The fundamental role of 'speech', for good or ill, is captured by the Beirut Declaration in the following inspirational—but equally operational—words that stress the importance of a 'Faith for Rights' approach in armed conflict:

War starts in the minds and is cultivated by a reasoning fuelled by often hidden advocacy of hatred. Positive speech is also the healing tool of reconciliation and peace-building in the hearts and minds. Speech is one of the most strategic areas of the responsibilities we

commit to assume and support each other for their implementation through this Faith for Rights declaration ([Beirut Declaration 2017](#): 20).

As highlighted in the #Faith4Rights toolkit, '[t]he history of conflicts teaches us that people tend to focus more on what divides them than on what they have in common' ([OHCHR 2023](#): 9). In this context, interfaith dialogues can be an important first step, but only if they adopt a human rights-based methodology and produce concrete results leading to sustainable impact. This is precisely the added value of the peer-to-peer learning methodology as developed in the #Faith4Rights toolkit, which provides a rights-based approach for bringing together the two worlds of faith and human rights. Most importantly, this methodology seeks to reflect and facilitate measurable changes rather than focussing only on inter-religious dialogue as such. In doing so, it also provides concrete guidance to the—sometimes daunting—task for facilitators of such peer-to-peer learning or for mediators in an armed conflict. Indeed, 'Faith for Rights' provides both a conceptual framework and a corresponding implementation methodology that could bridge gaps and prevent or temper conflicts on the basis of religions and beliefs. Key for this is Commitment XI, which pledges not to oppress critical voices and views on matters of religion or belief, and it also urges States to repeal any existing anti-blasphemy or anti-apostasy laws.

While most faith-based actors have provided positive feedback to the 'Faith for Rights' framework, for example by noting that it is a compelling way to translate ethical values into concrete action ([Religions for Peace 2020](#)), there also has been lukewarm reception or pushback from some religious leaders. An ultra-conservative scholar criticized that 'Commitment XI demands something that is unacceptable to Islam' and he even advocated for killing persons who left Islam, arguing that '[t]o execute apostates is an *ijma*' [consensus] among the *fuqaha* [Islamic jurists], although the apostate is given some time (three days) to repent to cancel the execution' ([Matahati Muhammadin 2020](#): 108–9). This quote constitutes incitement to violence in the name of religion, and it also illustrates how ultra-conservative voices get into the defensive and expose themselves to public scrutiny and human rights critique. Thus, the 'Faith for Rights' framework empowers the vast majority of believers to stand up together against human rights violations that are disguised under religious interpretations. Indeed, three former Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, who were also Muslims, have clarified the religious and human rights angles of conversion. Abdelfattah Amor—from Tunisia—stressed that 'religious freedom cannot be dissociated from the freedom to change religion' ([UN Commission on Human Rights 1996](#): 77). Asma Jahangir—from Pakistan—noted that '[e]ven though some religious believers seem to accept a conversion only when it involves a change into their own religion such an approach does not acknowledge diversity and infringes on freedom of religion or belief' ([UN Human Rights Council 2008](#): 78). Ahmed Shaheed—from the Maldives—highlighted that the right to change one's religion or belief 'enjoys unconditional and unqualified protection and cannot be restricted, limited, interfered with or derogated from under any circumstances, including during times of public emergency' ([UN Human Rights Council 2017](#): 27).

The nature, scope and perceived hierarchy between religions and rights is the proverbial elephant in such discussions, which also explains the temptation to avoid addressing religious issues as such in multilateral institutions ([Salama and Wiener 2022](#): 38). Yet, in real life, all value systems overlap. Consequently, engagement with faith-based actors has gradually increased over the past years, both at the United Nations and in other international forums such as the G20. The above-mentioned controversy about 'apostasy' – and other human rights violations in the name of religion notably in the areas of gender, expression, minorities and conflict—underline the importance of engaging with religious leaders on the solid human rights basis as articulated by the 18 Commitments on 'Faith for Rights'.

There is obviously a security dimension to the instrumentalization of religion. During the 2023 Munich Security Conference, a panel discussion on religion, diplomacy and conflicts notably explored how the ‘Faith for Rights’ framework could be used for ‘*peacing it together*’ by supporting and facilitating the positive contributions of religious or belief actors (Sovereign Order of Malta 2023). The panellists encouraged policy-makers and practitioners to include religious leaders and faith-based actors in the sphere of international politics in order to increase peace and security everywhere in the world—while fully respecting all human rights for everyone.

Lastly, the crucial ‘role of religious actors in supporting peace and building bridges between people’ was already stressed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who in this context noted that ‘[t]he values of compassion, mutual respect and forgiveness found in all religions are essential elements in preventing armed conflict and addressing the spread of violent extremism’ (Guterres 2018: 8).

Funding Statement:

No funding.

Conflict of Interests Declaration:

Nothing to declare.

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