

Written Testimony of Ms. Sharon Rosen
Submitted to the
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
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Chairman Perkins, Vice Chairs Manchin and Maenza, and Commissioners of the United States Commission on International Freedom,

It is an honor for me to join you today. Thank you for convening this important and timely hearing on protecting houses of worship and safeguarding holy sites. I am grateful for the United States' global leadership on this topic and to you for maintaining a focus on religious freedom.

My name is Sharon Rosen, and I am the Global Director of Religious Engagement for the international NGO Search for Common Ground. Search has been a leader in peacebuilding for nearly forty years, working in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. I have traveled here today from Jerusalem, where I have lived for the past 37 years, working on religious engagement and conflict transformation and experiencing first-hand the potential of religious spaces to promote peace, harmony, and reconciliation. While Search is a non-aligned organization, we have worked with religious actors throughout our history, and in 2017 we established the Global Religious Engagement Department to better explore how to deepen this work. While my testimony is informed by my 15 years with Search, the views I express here today are my own.

I will begin by briefly describing the current context, needs, and opportunities around the protection of holy sites and houses of worship. I will then provide case studies of how the [Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites](#),¹ which Search co-created, has been a useful tool to build mutual trust and reduce tensions around holy places. Finally, I will offer recommendations to the U.S. government on ways to further protect places of worship.

The Current Context

Every day, millions visit houses of worship and holy sites for contemplation and community prayer. Yet holy sites also experience desecration, and some worshippers face intimidation. In 2019, we have seen sacred spaces become the scenes of devastating destruction and loss of life, from a mosque in Christchurch to a Catholic church in Colombo, from Wat Rattananupab temple in Thailand to the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Holy sites are symbolic of people's deepest identities and are deliberately targeted to inflict physical and psychological harm as well as collective trauma on a particular community. However, when all segments of society, including governments and people of faith or no faith, collectively

¹ <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ucchs.pdf>

protect the holy sites of communities, an alternate and powerful symbolic message of healing and togetherness is broadcasted. The U.S. is uniquely positioned to collaborate with others to confront the issue of attacks on holy sites and promote the freedom of belief and worship so that all people can feel safe and secure when they visit their sacred spaces. International resolutions and interfaith declarations, while important for awareness raising, alone cannot succeed in protecting holy sites or the people worshipping in them. There is clearly a need for a multi-pronged approach to safeguarding places of worship that includes **prevention, preparedness, and response** to attacks, as has been highlighted in the U.N. Alliance of Civilization's recently launched [Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites](#).

My remarks today will focus on Search's **preventive** community initiatives, which are one component of our broader focus on contributing to healthy, safe, and just societies. These initiatives focus on the root causes of conflict and stress inclusion and trust-building as guiding principles to reduce inter-religious tensions. We help mutual trust and cooperation flourish by focusing on an issue of common concern – protecting holy sites. By harnessing this common need, we reduce hostility between religious groups and build resilient communities.

I am often asked, “Why the focus on physical sites?” This year, we received a resounding answer with the devastating murders of hundreds of people in different parts of the world as they prayed in their churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. **We cannot differentiate between holy places and the people who visit them; by protecting physical spaces for worship, we protect their worshippers. By caring for the physical integrity of buildings, graveyards, sacred groves, and other holy sites, we uphold the human dignity of those who hold them dear.** But another answer from a Syrian resident among the ruins of Aleppo in 2013 reverberates in my ears. When he saw the minaret of the 11th Century Ummayad Mosque fall to the ground, he said, “This is the first time I cried. My identity has been destroyed.” **Holy Sites are also symbols of our deepest identities – of who we are, how our traditions shape us, and how we live our lives.** I, too, strongly identify with that statement when I practice my own faith in the holy city of Jerusalem. No religion is immune from attack. **It is only when we care for our common future and act together that we shall truly feel safe in our sacred spaces.**

Protecting Holy Sites by Promoting Mutual Respect and Collaboration

In 2007, I was invited to a meeting in Trondheim, Norway, of religious, civil, and political leaders by two Norwegian NGOs, One World in Dialogue and the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights. I was asked to present my rather mixed experiences from an initiative I had been directing on engaging religious leaders to protect holy sites in Jerusalem. That meeting also exposed the frightening frequency of attacks on and lack of access to holy sites in Europe and the Middle East. It became clear that there was a need to create a code of conduct to protect and preserve sacred spaces that would be endorsed by states and implemented on the ground. The result was a dedicated partnership between Search, the Norwegian NGOs, and Religions for Peace to develop a code.

In consultation with senior religious leaders world-wide and over a period of three years, we developed a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, which helps safeguard holy sites, now and for future generations, and to promote interreligious reconciliation and mutual acceptance. The Universal Code was launched in 2011 and includes ten articles that are designed to establish a framework of norms, be adaptable to the location where implemented, and be applicable across all religious and faith traditions. While every place is unique, the Universal Code reflects shared understandings on issues of establishment, expropriation, and archeological excavations and includes steps to promote access, preservation, sharing, research, and education. It also encourages the establishment of monitoring mechanisms.

The Universal Code is a normative rather than legal document, and it focuses on codes of behavior, offers practical guidelines for protecting places of worship, and includes a bold call for cooperation among all relevant authorities, including religious actors, who are often in conflict. In cases where state authorities fail to effectively safeguard sacred spaces, the Universal Code enables bottom-up community level activities by empowering religious actors - men, women, and youth - to play their part. The Universal Code is available in 15 languages and has been endorsed by a variety of interfaith networks, religious communities, and leaders worldwide.²

Since its launch the Universal Code has matured into a dynamic initiative with implementation in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North America, and Africa. In one example, Universal Code initiatives included a partnership with the Interreligious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which developed a collaborative model for engaging religious leaders, local municipalities, the police, courts, and the media to protect holy sites. The collaboration resulted in more effective police action, faster sentencing of culprits, prompt repairing of damage, and a reduction in the number of attacks. The successful model was copied by the OSCE for implementation in Ukraine. Activities have also taken place in Nigeria, Jerusalem, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and among Native American tribes. Two examples provide particular examples of how shared norms coupled with on-the-ground initiatives can protect holy sites and promote freedom of religion:

Nigeria: Search began working in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, where the conflict is not inherently sectarian, but violence has often played out along religious lines to devastating effects. Nigeria has also experienced significant extremist violence. Search has worked to prevent ethno-religious violence, counter violent extremism, implement early warning early response efforts, and promote accountability. Our efforts have shown that despite the devastation that has taken place, by and large, Nigeria reflects mutual religious acceptance. A 2010 Pew study showed that 87% of the citizens believe religion plays an important role in their life, and 71% think that it is a good thing for people of other faiths to have freedom to practice their beliefs.

² Examples include Religions for Peace World Council, the World Sikh Leadership, President of the All India Imam Organization, World Council of Churches, The Hindu Forum of Europe, the Muslim Council of Great Britain, and the Israel Council of Heads of Religions.

Against this backdrop, we engaged male and female Christian and Muslim community religious leaders in Northern Nigeria to build consensus within their communities around the principle that holy places are sites for peace and reconciliation rather than targets for attack. The ability of religious community leaders to come together across faith lines in a conflict zone on an issue of common concern was a unique step in itself towards facilitating collaboration and joint action. Local, regional, and national conferences were held across the three northern zones of Nigeria, ending in media conferences that highlighted the relationship between protecting holy sites and addressing hate speech, particularly by other religious leaders. There were also calls to counter misinformation, abuse, and rumors that spur confusion and raise tension between religious communities that in extreme cases lead to recruitment by violent extremist organizations. Particular attention was paid to engaging youth through a photo and video competition calling for a demonstrated understanding of holy sites as places of worship, peace, and dialogue.

Sheikh Nurudeen Lemu, from the Da'Wa Institute in Nigeria, said about this initiative, "once a place of worship has been demolished, the conflict changes its identity from its real cause to a religious one, and the moment it becomes religious, or is tagged as religious,... [everybody] takes sides. If we can find a way of keeping religious sites, sacred places, out of the conflict and have an agreement about that, it becomes more easy to diagnose the problems and to treat them." As Pastor Margaret Inusa Meka of the Glorious Life International Church, Jos added "I think that if we can have that common ground, then we are taking a step towards peace in God's world."³

Mount Zion, Jerusalem: In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and frequent violence around holy sites, Search's Jerusalem program, together with the Jerusalem Intercultural Center based on Mount Zion and with the endorsement of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, worked to reduce interreligious tensions, build cooperation, protect places of worship, and turn Mount Zion into a center that celebrates the heritages of all three religions attached to it - Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Just outside Jerusalem's Old City walls, Mount Zion is the location of a highly sensitive shared holy site for the Abrahamic Faiths – the Tomb of King David/Nabi Daud, the Room of the Last Supper and a Minaret, all in one building. Centuries-long conflict over ownership and religious rights, fueled by rivalry and intolerance, had resulted in an atmosphere of suspicion and violence. This initiative aimed at changing this atmosphere by building trust and cooperation on issues of common interest. Activities included: engaging religious actors with representatives from government ministries, the municipality, and law enforcement agencies to identify shared concerns and find collaborative solutions; establishing a body of volunteers to help maintain a harmonious atmosphere and assist with religious services; and organizing workshops and site visits for Jerusalem Old City's law enforcement authorities and youth to increase interreligious sensitivity.

³ <https://www.sfcg.org/holy-sites-nigeria/>

The results have been quite spectacular given the initial mistrust and intermittent violent behavior. For the first time ever, a 2016 desecration of the Dormition Abbey, located on Mount Zion, elicited a joint public condemnation by religious leaders living on the Mount;⁴ local authorities were enlisted to repair safety hazards; law enforcement improved; and there was a reduction in violence. Over one thousand Jewish youth and hundreds of Palestinian youth have taken part in tours to expand understanding of the attachments of different religions to their sacred spaces. In one specific example of the project's influence, an interfaith group of volunteers cleaned up years of garbage and restored tombstones in the famous Muslim Dajani-Daoudi Cemetery on Mount Zion while supplied with refreshments from the local Ultra-Orthodox, politically right-wing Jewish seminary overlooking the cemetery. These types of acts may seem like small steps, but they build trust across hardened divides, foster critical discussions about protecting spaces for all faiths, and promote mutual acceptance that undermines acts of hate in the long run.

Lessons Learned and Key Recommendations

The Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites is one useful example of a flexible and practical tool. Below are my recommendations to the U.S. government, drawing on lessons learned:

- **Security approaches alone cannot solve this problem.** Sustainable solutions to interreligious conflicts are built on mutual trust and finding common ground, which takes time, patience, and a policy of inclusion. The Universal Code offers an opportunity to move beyond just a focus on threats and towards a positive understanding of religion and holy sites. The U.S. can make a difference by supporting, through diplomacy and foreign assistance, holistic strategies for the safeguarding of holy sites, with an emphasis on sustainable and cost-effective people-to-people approaches that are community-based and are focused on common interests and concerns. A twin tracked approach is needed. The Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State and the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives in USAID need to continue to provide leadership in this space and mainstream the positive role of religion and the Universal Code within their agencies. At the same time, other relevant offices and bureaus including regional and functional bureaus, including the Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and USAID's Development, Democracy, and Innovation and Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, need to serve as partners in developing and implementing bespoke approaches.
- **Multi-stakeholder approaches are essential.** Policies and programs need to reflect the perspectives of all of the relevant faith and non-faith stakeholders. Religious leaders, particularly those working at the community level, have a critical role to play, and men, women, and youth must all be engaged and empowered to protect holy sites and houses of

⁴ The statement noted, "We, residents of Mount Zion, call on the public to preserve the security and mutual respect of the Holy Places to all religions on Mount Zion. When one of these places is desecrated, it affects not only the site itself, but also all other holy sites on Mount Zion. In addition, these repeated acts of desecration undermine the delicate fabric of coexistence in the Holy Land in general and in the Holy City of Jerusalem in particular."

worship. At the same time, effective protection approaches require collaboration with actors such as local and national government representatives, law enforcement authorities, the media, and courts of justice among others. Similarly, the U.S. should utilize multi-stakeholder approaches with other governments and in international fora. The Potomac Plan of Action commits to speaking “out bilaterally, as well as through multilateral fora, against violations or abuses of the right to freedom of religion or belief.” This commitment needs to include a strong call for the protection of sacred spaces.

- **More resources are needed to protect holy sites.** While holy sites have long been targeted, the number of attacks in recent years, including through acts of terrorism, indicates that current protection efforts are insufficient. The current Administration recently dedicated \$25 million to protect religious sites and relics. This is a significant step and a great opportunity for initiatives funded by this allocation to reduce risks of attacks on holy sites in alignment with the Universal Code of Conduct. In addition, with the growing awareness of the need to engage religious actors, resources also need to be invested in faith literacy training for U.S. employees and other international actors working in the fields of conflict, security, and development.
- **Protecting holy sites requires addressing chronic conflict and fragility.** As much as we need to focus specifically on protecting holy sites and houses of worship, this Commission also needs to focus on addressing the complex emergencies that fuel violence and social tensions. Chronic conflict and fragility put holy sites at risk. The U.S. needs to address and prevent violent conflict, including through the implementation of the Elie Wiesel Act, by passing the Global Fragility Act, and by ensuring that appropriations are both available to the places most at risk and are flexible enough to respond to emerging risks.
- **Both governmental and non-governmental actors have an important role to play.** Governments have a critical role to play in ensuring security and promoting human rights. In particular, they are uniquely positioned to institutionalize best practices by permanently integrating constructive educational programs for school students, law enforcement personnel, and other professionals, which are proven to reduce interreligious tensions, into curricula. However, many aspects of protection are best implemented by neutral third parties and religious actors themselves with expertise in the field who are able to lead efforts to foster inter-group acceptance and collaboration.

I remain committed to working toward sustainable solutions to protecting places of worship based on collaborative approaches that deal with root causes. I look forward to working with the U.S. government and other partners to make that happen.