

# SECURING FORB THROUGH AN INCLUSIVE PEACEBUILDING APPROACH

## CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

JISRA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
TUESDAY NOVEMBER 4, 2025  
COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT HOTEL, BRUSSELS





# BUILDING BRIDGES FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM



## Introduction

**This document presents the main highlights and take aways of the international conference on Securing ForB through an inclusive peacebuilding approach, organised by the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) on the 4th of November 2025 in Brussels, Belgium.**

More than 50 civil society organisations across Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Uganda, and Nigeria have been working together through JISRA to foster peaceful and just societies where everyone can enjoy Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). This work has not only advanced Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies), but it has also contributed to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), which are firmly rooted in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

JISRA was implemented in partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and coordinated by four international consortium partners: Mensen met een Missie (lead organisation), Faith to Action Network, Search for Common Ground, and Tearfund UK & Tearfund Netherlands, with support from the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.

The conference brought together participants from JISRA countries, policymakers, practitioners, academics, and funding organisations to celebrate achievements and reflect on lessons learned. It highlighted the importance of engaging religious actors in peacebuilding and demonstrated how FoRB for all is essential to building lasting peace.

# OPENING

The conference was opened by **Bea ten Tusscher**, former Dutch Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief and **Rick van der Woud**, CEO of Mensen met een Missie. Their messages underscored a shared commitment to strengthening Freedom of Religion or Belief through peacebuilding, localisation and long-term engagement with religious and traditional actors.

**Want to know more  
about the speakers?**



- [Overview](#)



# EXHIBITION

Throughout the day, the exhibition showcased tools, stories and products that highlighted the daily realities of JISRA's work across the seven countries and of the lobby & advocacy work realized at the regional and global level. Also, a JISRA five-year magazine with inspiring stories was shared with all participants. The Universities of Groningen and Utrecht shared several policy papers produced in the context of the JISRA programme.

**Curious? Visit:**



- [JISRA five year magazine](#)
- [Groningen University](#)
- [Utrecht University](#)



# SESSION

## Sharing Power With Youth

Through sharing power with youth, JISRA aimed to transform gerontocratic norms as often young people are systemically excluded from decision making and leadership spaces through their supposed lack of knowledge, life-experience or vulnerability. Even when youth are included, their participation in leadership is often symbolic or 'tokenistic'. This exclusion causes grievances which in turn can give rise to violence as the only (perceived) way to be heard. One of the most important ways of changing decision making power has been through Participatory Grantmaking (PGM), whereby youth-led as well as women-led groups have control over the resources to address the issues that they know matter in their own communities. The session was facilitated by **Katharina Raudzus Haque**.

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**Before PGM, we were never asked what we needed. Now, we make the decisions.**

- Women's group leader

”

## Speakers

- **JP Katerega Latigo**
- **Luc Diarra**
- **Jan Slump**

## Key Themes and Insights

- PGM is an effective mechanism for creating a sense of local ownership and agency among youth. Grants are allocated by communities, for communities. This leads to social cohesion and increased trust in the funding body.
- PGM activities such as debates on peaceful coexistence and interreligious football matches brought together youth and adults from different religious backgrounds, which strengthened relationships and fostered mutual respect.
- Some PGM initiatives, such as skills acquisition centres of rehabilitation of water access points, address challenges which have given rise to conflict in the communities. Those initiatives have been taken on by the community members and are being sustained in the long term.
- In addition, PGM built the capacity of grantees, inspired youth-led solutions and mobilised youth to communicate about the Right to FoRB in their own creative ways. This gave youth a sense of agency, brought them into leadership roles and reduced overall tension between faith communities.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- Interfaith projects should focus on expanding PGM programmes to communities that were hard to reach in the current intervention.
- PGM interventions provide very good value for impact.
- Youth participation should be more than just checking a box on a list. To improve youth leadership in FoRB-related policies and programs, youth participation should be institutionalized, for example through local governments and international forums.
- Pay special attention to intergenerational dynamics when designing interventions for development change, in order to create trust and shared responsibility across age groups.
- To equip young leaders with broader perspectives and tools, interfaith projects should invest in and encourage youth-to-youth networks across regional, international, and cultural contexts, for example through fellowships, digital platforms, and youth forums.



# SESSION

## Women, Peace and Security: The Role of Female Religious Actors in Peacebuilding

Female religious actors play a vital role in promoting peace and protecting human rights. However, cultural expectations and systemic barriers often limit their leadership roles to private or informal settings. By addressing these barriers, we can create more inclusive and sustainable approaches to peace and conflict resolution. The session was facilitated by **Manuel Voordewind**.

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**Today women are peacemakers! When women are talking, people listen.**

– Dr. Rhoda Eke Udanyi

”

### Speakers

- Nageeba Hassan Tegulwa
- Dr. Rhoda Eke Udanyi
- Dr. Simon Polinder
- Zinah Hamawand

### Key Themes and Insights

- Women operate both beyond and within their faith communities by serving as mediators and preventing community conflicts. Despite limited formal authority they have significant influence over youth and serve as key actors in preventing radicalization.
- Structural barriers to women's participation in spaces of faith are directly linked to cultural restrictions, economic dependence and domestic constraints. Excluding women from these spaces is a form of subtle violence because it undermines women's ability to shape discourse.
- Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) is a gendered policy space that is socially constructed to be associated with 'masculinity', which inhibits women's participation and leadership in those spaces.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- Projects that take an interfaith approach to peacebuilding need to take women's capacity for leadership in all faith communities seriously. Harmful narratives on women's exclusion may be combatted by mobilizing scriptural messages on justice and equality from various belief communities.
- Cross-cultural or international exchange of experience between women religious actors can help recognize their potential for leadership and build their capacity in promoting peace and protecting human rights.



# SESSION

## Securing FoRB Through a Peacebuilding Approach

Freedom of thought, religion and conscience remain under threat. FoRB violations are a driver of violence as religious identities are violated. Building trust within and between communities requires a peacebuilding approach and the active involvement of youth, women and religious leaders. This session explored how the lessons learned from the past five years can support practitioners, peacemakers and donors to strengthen peacebuilding. The session was facilitated by **Gina Dias**.

“

**When I see the communities that have walked together, I feel motivated to do more.**

– Sr. Veronica Ifeyinwa Onyeansi

”

### Speakers

- Dr. Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen
- Kassim Wario Gobena
- Sr. Veronica Ifeyinwa Onyeansi



## Key Themes and Insights

- By speaking of conflict transformation rather than conflict resolution, attention is focussed towards addressing systemic drivers of conflict such as intergenerational trauma.
- Dialogue is an effective and reliable tool for sustainable peacebuilding because it raises awareness of minority religions and minorities within religions, as well as helping to combat stigmatizing narratives about these communities.
- In Indonesia, a highlight was also environmental peacebuilding instead of focusing on the 'religion angle', as religion was often difficult and awkward to discuss.
- Gender based violence is linked to other forms of violent extremism, bringing these issues together was pivotal in peacebuilding platforms.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- The perspectives of women and youth are key to sustainable peacebuilding.
- FoRB initiatives should move away from the language of 'inclusion' and towards one of 'transformational leadership'.
- The right to Freedom of Religion or Belief is translated and understood differently across cultures. When developing strategies to increase FoRB literacy, local meaning making structures should be taken into account.

# SESSION

## **Innovative Voices and Modalities Against Violence: How religious Actors Shape Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)**

This session presented best practices for the localization of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) through a Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) lens. Drawing on the JISRA programme, the session highlighted key learnings from JISRA partner organizations in Kenya, Indonesia and Nigeria. Participants shared best practices to support practitioners, policymakers, donors, and academics to strengthen their strategies for enhancing PCVE while adopting a FoRB perspective. The session was facilitated by **Rick van der Woud**.

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**Religious actors cannot be ignored, because religion in Kenya is the currency for peace building and community resilience.**

– Phyllis Muema

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### **Speakers**

- **Phyllis Muema**
- **Dr. Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen**
- **Irfan Amali**
- **Dr. Simon Polinder**

### **Key Themes and Insights**

- Religion plays a fundamental role in shaping people’s worldviews and informing their actions. It is an important driver of positive social change. Religious actors are crucial to countering and preventing violent extremism. The role of female religious leaders is often overlooked in this.
- The nexus between PCVE and FoRB is complex. Violent extremism is often looked at from a religious lens. There are other structural, social, economic and political drivers that fuel various kinds of extremism. The role of religion in PCVE is relational: it should always be seen in relation to other factors.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- The government should invest more in non-security approaches and address conditions conducive violent extremism – education, health, food security, social welfare etc
- Donors should consider increasing financial support to Localised Action Plans and increasing capacity of faith actors to continue preventing violent extremism that leads to atrocities and terrorism
- Faith actors should amplify their efforts such as the JISRA programme to enhance community resilience and more so invest in women, youth, minorities.

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**Religion can inspire great beauty and moving goodness. However, it can also contribute to horrific conflicts and painful contradictions. Through research and dialogue, we try to better understand the complex role of religion, so that it can be a driver of positive social change.**

– Dr. Simon Polinder

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# SESSION

## Development, Diplomacy & Defense: The Role of Religious Actors in Integral Foreign Policy to Promote Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB)

This session explored the various interplays of development, FoRB promotion and peace, highlighting the ways in which religious actors can be active participants and supporters of diplomacy and peace. The session was facilitated by **Hilde Deman**, Executive Director of Search for Common Ground and **Rick van der Woud**, Executive Director of Mensen met een Missie.

### Speakers

- Rick van der Woud
- Hilde Deman
- Juan José García Carreño
- Prof Dr. Erin Wilson
- Ismail Abdirahman
- Phyllis Muema
- Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi
- Julia Munsters

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To achieve sustainable peace and security, defence and development actors must recognize religion as an essential dimension of human identity and social order.

– Ismail Abdirahman

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## Key Themes and Insights

Religious leaders and actors play a crucial role in shaping values, mediating conflict, and mobilizing communities and this makes them indispensable partners in advancing peace and stability. When engaged meaningfully, religious leaders become bridges between state and society, amplifying resilience, preventing radicalization, and fostering inclusive, community-driven security and development.

Religious leaders have legitimacy and soft power and use diplomacy to contribute to the prevention of conflicts. They are grounded in communities, and well-connected with other religious leaders, social and political actors. They can soften tensions between different groups and contribute to countering false narratives.

Religious leaders can have both positive and negative roles as diplomats. Apart from religious leaders it is key to involve informal leaders with influence and women and youth as they play a crucial role at community level when it comes to interfaith communication, relationship building and mediation.

There are often tensions between young and old religious leaders, due to different experiences, worldviews and authenticity. Young people who want to take on leadership and organisational roles in their communities are often prevented from doing so, and become frustrated and disillusioned.

There is a tendency to “engender” violent extremism and insecurity, ascribing it primarily to young men and seeing women/girls primarily as victims. But women and girls are also known to be active agents of violent extremism in different contexts.

Combating violent extremism requires a holistic approach that addresses both immediate security concerns and the underlying socioeconomic and political drivers that enable extremist ideologies to take root. The role of religious actors, particularly women religious actors, becomes central, especially in assisting governments to reframe the narrative and counter the polarization and hate divisive messages of the extremists.

Religious diplomacy can counter xenophobia, intolerance, violent acts and violations of FoRB. For instance, mainstream Muslim religious scholars and activists have responded to advancing the rights of marginalized communities, affirming that Islamic traditions and legal frameworks are indeed compatible with universal human rights. The Marrakesh Declaration (2016) calls on civil society and interfaith actors to foster environments of mutual trust, dismantle hate, and rebuild social contracts rooted in shared humanity.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- The question to answer is whether religious diplomacy should be instrumentalised in foreign policy, which might also risk reducing its effectiveness.
- The EU should be aware that other countries, like Russia and China, are engaging in religious diplomacy and, if necessary, also invest in religious diplomacy at global and local level, finding a balance with other (development, defense) interventions, and using the numerous existing declarations, to mobilize religious leaders and scholars.
- The EU should increase funding for peacebuilding, conflict resolution and the role of religious actors in community cohesion. Without peace, it will be difficult to achieve the SDGs and religion is a key ingredient to achieving peace.
- Donors need to expand their support to programmes like JISRA that link local to global spaces, since religions have no borders. Conflicts in the Middle East for example have immediate and direct impact on communities living in rural Kenya.
- Specific support should be given to women peacemakers as well as informal (youth) leaders with influence as they play a key role in prevention (early warning, community policing) and mediation (response) at the local level. To avoid additional burden, women religious actors and peacemakers do need additional support, e.g. via participatory grantmaking.
- Religious leaders and actors themselves also face challenges and need to be supported to become more open to changes and to adjust preconceived ideas to be able to connect and engage.
- Religious leaders and actors must also remain vigilant to ensure international human rights safeguards are protected by States especially in pursuit of counter terrorism measures and more specially FoRB.
- More attention needs to be given to the implementation of the Marrakesh Declaration, involving MPs, ministries, lawyers and other legal professionals.

# SESSION

## Youth, Digital Safety & Human Rights: Role of Youth in Addressing Online Radicalisation, Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Promote FoRB Through Digital Technologies

Youth can address online radicalisation, polarisation, and violent extremism through digital technologies while promoting FoRB. The session highlighted practical tools such as gamification, digital literacy, and social media advocacy as means to counter extremist narratives and build inclusive digital spaces. The session also looked at the government's responsibilities for laws and policies around digital safety. The discussion drew lessons from Indonesia's PeaceGeneration, Gusduran Network and Nigeria's FoRB Hotline initiatives under JISRA. The session was facilitated by **Stephanie Joubert** and **Julia Churchill**.

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**Fun can change you. When learning is interactive, it shifts perspectives and behaviours.**

– Irfan Amali

”

### Speakers

- Irfan Amali
- Jerry Gode Bulus
- Heru Prasetya

### Key Themes and Insights

- Games and online platforms have been weaponized by extremist groups for recruitment and propaganda. To foster meaningful interactions across religious lines, game-based learning can be used as an innovative transformative educational tool that applies game elements to non-game contexts to motivate behavioural change, empathy, critical thinking and increase engagement.
- Integrating digital innovation with youth-led peace initiatives enhances resilience against hate narratives and facilitates cross-country learning. Social media can produce alternative narratives that emphasize tolerance and inclusion. By using online/offline mechanisms, youth can be trained as digital peace advocates to counter misinformation and report violations.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- Equip youth with digital safety, literacy, and peace communication skills to counter extremist propaganda.
- Strengthen legal frameworks such as the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime and align with UNSCR 2250 (Youth, Peace and Security).
- Encourage inclusive dialogues with tech companies on self-regulation and content moderation.
- Promote intergenerational collaboration through awareness campaigns online and offline.
- Ensure donors and governments provide enabling environments for youth-led digital peacebuilding initiatives.
- Foster cross-country exchange learning within JISRA networks to sustain innovative peace technologies.
- Board games bring young people together to have meaningful conversations and interactions, build empathy and peaceful problem solving (teaching teachers how to do this in schools).
- Using gamification to build young people's resilience to violent extremism propaganda (once a game is shared and taught, it can be used at very low cost for other audiences).
- Young people are leading in the online space and need to be trained for countering misinformation and how to report FoRB violations.
- Early warning/early response systems do work, they need the infrastructure to be set up and support to ensure follow up can happen in a timely manner but they build trust within the community as accountability is visible.



# SESSION

## Think Local, Act Global: Evidence-based Grassroots Advocacy in International Fora

International fora hosted by multilateral organisations remain heavily dominated by INGOs and global actors, whereas grassroots organisations often lack the resources or capacity to engage. Their absence creates a gap where crucial perspectives and evidence is missed, reducing the efficacy of policies and frameworks decided at this level, further entrenching disconnections between global and local analyses and responses to violent conflict and attacks on human rights. JISRA helped bridging this gap through coalitions, joint campaigns, and cross-border learnings in spaces such as the UN and AU. In this session, participants explored advocacy case studies and shared lessons from their own practices. The session was facilitated by **Stephanie Joubert**.

### Speakers

- **Sultan Seybou**
- **Sr Veronica Ifeyinwa Onyeansi**
- **Nerlian Gogali**

### Key Themes and Insights

- **Evidence-based policy shaping:** Evidence collected locally in Nigeria was used by women of faith to help shape global advocacy narratives on FoRB, influencing policy discussions at the AU, UN Human Rights Council, and the EU FoRB Working Group.
- **The power of narrative shift:** In Poso Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, local actors successfully shifted the conflict narrative from purely focusing on land rights to broader environmental concerns (Biodiversity, Culture Diversity, Geodiversity). This repositioning allowed them to connect with multiple UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights, climate change, cultural rights, and the right to food.
- **Enabling Global Access:** JISRA provided youth with an unparalleled platform, such as participating in the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), granting them direct access to policymakers and world leaders to share their grassroots experiences.

## General Lessons and Recommendations

- Continuously and systematically train local faith actors in data collection, research, and policy framing to ensure local evidence meets international standards and directly informs policy engagement.
- Use the Indonesia example to encourage local advocates to strategically frame FoRB issues within broader human rights and development contexts (e.g., climate change, food sovereignty, cultural rights) to engage a wider range of international rapporteurs and bodies.
- Advocate for the immediate implementation of recommendations to include youth and women in FoRB dialogue platforms, recognizing their informal leadership and influence, and ensure their participation is meaningful, not as decoration.
- Use the power of voices in groups of people and their influence in spheres of influence, focusing on cross-cutting aspects of youths and women. Use story telling and poems (Kaori - Literature) to advocate.
- Facilitate learning exchanges on specific advocacy topics and local, regional and global collaboration between community organisations.
- Sustained global connection: Continue facilitating the participation of grassroots youth and religious leaders in high-level international fora (like the HLPF) to ensure local realities remain at the highest level of political discourse.

“

**Youth are central to all levels of advocacy as architects of change; their participation in international fora transforms them from passive observers to active advocates.**

– Sultan Sybou

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# SESSION

## Role of Interfaith Peace Committees in addressing Harmful Narratives and Security

Interfaith Peace Committees play an essential role in addressing conflicts, harmful narratives and security in faith communities. Speakers in the session shared their stories and contributions to contribute to lasting and peaceful coexistence in their communities. The session was facilitated by **Farida Abdulbasit**.

### Speakers

- Sheik Musa Khalil
- Jean Dieu Dembele
- Dastan Qader Abdullah

“

**When women joined our peace committees, trust began to grow in ways we had not seen before. Even though it took some time to convince the committees to accept participation of women, their presence made the committees more inclusive, and communities started to believe in the process. I have seen individual women who once felt sidelined rise to become confident leaders, guiding initiatives that heal divisions.**

– Dastan Qader

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### Key Themes and Insights

#### The case of Iraq

- Iraq is an ethnically and religiously diverse country with a vast Muslim majority. Following the Islamic State offensive into Iraq in 2014, thousands of people were killed or abducted in religious based conflicts. A need to work on peacebuilding and unity was felt, as there was no trust or communication among the affected communities. This has led to the establishment of intra and interfaith committees in Nineveh. Via JISRA, partner organisations addressed

the mistrust through the establishment of inter- and intrafaith committees, which were given responsibilities of resolving community related problems and bringing the community members together to work with the government and ethnic groups.

Challenges:

- Forming interfaith communities was tough, since affected communities did not trust each other, and not all communities felt comfortable to attend interfaith dialogue sessions. By first focussing on civic issues, enough trust was eventually built between communities to start discussions on faith, trauma healing, and supporting those in need.
- Inter- and intrafaith communities were male dominated, and the position of women was marginalized. To promote women's inclusion, faith leaders formed communities with equal numbers of male and female members. This reduced the gender gap and built the capacity of female members, some of whom would eventually go on to become leaders and establish initiatives of themselves.

Sustainability:

- Inter- and intrafaith communities were formally registered and have started working together with the Iraqi government. In addition, these formalized communities have obtained the necessary skills to look for funding and write project proposals.

### **The case of Mali**

- From 2012 onwards, interfaith religious and community leaders came together to address Muslim-Christian conflicts in Mali. When JISRA came into existence, three interfaith committees from the Muslims, Catholic and Evangelicals were established to promote peace at an interfaith level through scriptural teachings. The committees decided to support the establishment of interfaith groups to work on peace, unity and to tackle extremist hate speech, using dialogues. They were supported by the JISRA programme and implemented several activities to promote social cohesion and peace, like cultural events, sports matches, blood donations and sanitation of religious spaces. Youth and women were active participants in the implementation of these activities, conveying messages of peace through WhatsApp and other social media platforms, while fighting hate speech and harmful narratives in cooperation with religious leaders.

## Key Themes and Insights

### Challenges:

- Interfaith initiatives were not always accepted by community members because of their interest in creating an Islamic state in Mali.
- Interfaith committees facilitated sensitization sessions where community members resisted to accept each other.
- Produced videos on peace were not accepted by the target community members, contributing to their mistrust of each other.

### Sustainability:

- Interfaith committees were trained on resource mobilisation and cross-committee coordination.
- The committees were able to register as social networks in Mali.
- Interfaith youth groups and women networks were registered as the national council of youths in Mali.

### The case of Uganda

- Peace initiatives consisted of representatives of the Anglican church, the Catholic church, the Seventh Day adventist, Born Again churches, and Islam. In Uganda, violent conflict has led to the loss of lives, displacement of people, and abduction of youths. Consequently, all the interfaith communities got together and acted as amnesty groups. The government recognized and accepted the peace committees. The peace committees obtained support from various embassies and international organizations like the UNDP. In 2016, a peace agreement was signed between the government and the rebel groups. The interfaith peace committees were observers of the signing of this agreement.

### JISRA has played a significant role in the process because it:

- Contributed in training the different social actors and duty bearers, religious leaders, and allied democratic forces, In the refugee camps, a Catholic organisation was giving services to IDPs and because of false narratives and hate speech from the born again church/team, the people threw the items provided by the Catholic services. But after JISRA dialogues were facilitated, people were able to work together with the Catholics.
- Involved youths in cultural dance and sports competition that helped the youths to establish positive and productive relations with others ultimately social cohesion.
- Worked in the (Unity Church) religious groups who used conflict against Muslims but through JISRA dialogue, these conflicting groups were enabled to live peacefully with other religious groups (Muslims).
- Trained different duty bearers and changed their attitude to work with other community members, then peace was realized.



# CLOSING

## An instrument for Peace

**Marc van Dijk** offered some final thoughts to conclude the conference in his column "An instrument for Peace". He shared his personal and philosophical reflection based on observations made throughout the day.

Read the column here:



- [Marc van Dijk](#)





SPECIAL THANKS TO THE DUTCH  
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND  
ITS EMBASSIES FOR THEIR  
CONTINUED TRUST, PARTNERSHIP,  
AND COMMITMENT TO ADVANCING  
FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF  
AROUND THE WORLD.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs