

## STRATEGIC NOTE ON RELIGION & DIPLOMACY

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### *Contents*

Religious Actors, Health Care, and  
COVID-19 Response . . . . . 2

The Abraham Accords . . . . . 7

Religion in a Non-Religious War: The  
Conflict over Nagorno Karabakh . . 8

UAE-Qatar Religious Rivalry Cools as  
Saudi Arabia Seeks Resolution . . 10

Islam and the War in Yemen. . . . 11

Conflicting Rights? Freedom of  
Religion or Belief and Gender  
Equality . . . . . 13

Impact of COVID-19 on Democracy  
and Muslims in South Asia . . . . 15

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This Strategic Note highlights key recent developments pertaining to the religious dimensions of major topics in foreign policy, offering a brief analysis of how religion fits into the picture, how religion may affect future developments, and suggestions about how to learn more.*

*The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of Berkley Center, Georgetown University, the Luce Foundation, or any TPNRD-participating government.*

# INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to the 2021 *Strategic Note on Religion & Diplomacy*. Produced by the Advisory Council of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion & Diplomacy (TPNRD), this annual resource is designed to help diplomats, policymakers, and other foreign policy professionals to recognize and understand the intersection of religion and the most pressing issues today in world affairs.

Each edition of the *Strategic Note* highlights key recent developments pertaining to the religious dimensions of major topics in foreign policy, offering a brief analysis of how religion fits into the picture, how religion may affect future developments, and suggestions about how to learn more. The views expressed in each section are those of the author and necessarily those of their institution, the TPNRD, or any government that participates in the TPNRD.

Please also consult TPNRD's full collection of resources on religion and international affairs at the [Religion & Diplomacy](#) portal site.

## SPECIAL FOCUS: RELIGIOUS ACTORS, HEALTH CARE, AND COVID-19 RESPONSE

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As the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines steps up around the world, in this first-ever special focus section of the *Strategic Note*, we highlight the often-crucial role of religious actors in supporting and maximizing access to health care and positive health outcomes for communities globally. In this special section, we include three pieces from leading thinkers and practitioners in the field of religion and global health.

First, Katherine Marshall provides an overview of current research, practice, and attitudes towards religious engagement in health care. As with all areas of religious engagement, there is no hard and fast rule of thumb. Rather, country-led analysis is crucial to determining where, when, how, and which religious actors contribute to the achievement of positive health outcomes for all.

Second, Olivia Wilkinson looks back to the Ebola crisis of 2014 to 2015 to draw out lessons learned about religion and public health and what we need to bear in mind moving forward.

Third, Azza Karam highlights the importance of partnerships across secular-religious institutional divides in responding to the pandemic and the specific challenges and possibilities to which actors from both sides of the spectrum need to be paying attention.

Finally, Olivia Wilkinson gives an overview of who is doing what, where, and with whom with regard to vaccine rollout and partnerships with faith-based actors.

### *Religious Engagement and Public Health*

**Katherine Marshall, Georgetown University**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted significant [religious roles in both transmission and control of the virus](#), and thus in efforts at global and local levels to link religious actors to public health controls and to broader social, economic, and political responses. These roles fall under different headings that include:

- advocacy (the WHO and CDC, for example, have worked with religious bodies on appropriate COVID-linked messages);

- resistance to public health measures (legal suits contesting restrictions on gatherings, for example);
- social protection responses focused on vulnerable communities;
- and peacebuilding approaches to conflicts associated with the COVID emergencies ([scapegoating of specific communities blamed for transmission](#)).

Current areas of focus include engagement on vaccination campaigns (highlighting equity considerations and direct support in addressing distrust and misinformation) and the macroeconomic consequences of the crisis, where religious actors, notably the Catholic Church, are leading advocates for debt relief and restructuring and mobilization of finance for poorer countries.

In the growing academic and institutional ventures to link development and humanitarian work and religious engagement, health has been the first and most significant entry point. This is both because religious institutions in various world regions are significant health care providers (Catholic and Adventist hospitals, for example) and because of increased focus on community roles and deliberate behavior change efforts for healthy lives, where religious teachings and beliefs, as well as community care, play important roles ([malaria](#) and [tuberculosis monitoring](#), for example).

The roles—positive and less positive—of religious factors in recent epidemics have highlighted their importance and prompted development of significant partnerships that include specific initiatives within [UNAIDS](#), [the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis](#), and [PEPFAR](#). The [2014–2015 Ebola pandemic](#) and the continuing [HIV/AIDS challenges](#) have both highlighted the risks of ignoring religious factors and the benefits of proactive engagement. In a first, the respected journal [The Lancet published a series](#) in 2015 focused on faith-based health care that distilled evidence from research, including magnitude of roles, quality, and controversies (on reproductive health and end of life, for example). A [USAID/USIP Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement](#) in October 2020 drew on a substantial body of research on public health and religion, covering topics ranging from history and economics to areas of special concern, such as pandemic preparedness, approaches to disability, and mental health.

The focus on religion and health has sparked considerable attention, with some arguing that religious engagement has specific strengths and deserves priority attention, while others are more dubious about the quality and even motivations for religious engagement on public health. This dichotomy rather misses the central point, which is the enormous diversity of ways in which religious institutions, beliefs, and practices are involved. In some situations—such as fragile states or countries with a missionary legacy, including India and Anglophone Africa—religious health care is a substantial part of the system, while in others, religiously run facilities are quite limited and behavioral issues (diet and cleanliness practices, for example) involve religious and cultural elements. This points to the vital role of country-led analysis and strategic planning to identify and engage religious dimensions of public health.

### *Lessons from Health Engagement with Faith Actors: The Case of Ebola*

**Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities**

The influence of religious leaders in the 2014–2015 Ebola response has been called “[transformational](#)” and “[game changing](#).” The initial response did not take cultural and religious factors into account. It became clear in the first months of the response in 2014 that people in the affected areas were reacting negatively to the medicalized control efforts and that burials were a key event for transmission (with some [estimates stating as much as 20 to 60% of infections were occurring at burials](#)). People were very dissatisfied with the ways burials were taking place, with one survey finding that [71% of families were](#)

not able to attend their relatives funeral in the first six months, and 91% reporting that they were unhappy that prayer and washing and dressing of the bodies were not part of the burial process. Tensions between medical teams and communities were high, and levels of trust were very weak.

One of the most well-known “game changes” was the development and implementation of a [guideline for safe and dignified burial practices](#). The changes to the previous medical burial procedure were significant and included instructions on how to abide by both medical and religious needs during burial. The same survey as mentioned above found that 73% of families now attended the burial of their relative following the adoption of the new procedures in December 2014.

Other faith-based and non-faith-based actors also successfully adapted their ways of working to include increased or improved engagement with local faith actors, such as religious leaders. World Vision, building on its previously implemented faith-based mobilization model, Channels of Hope, created a [Channels of Hope for Ebola](#). Missionary sisters worked on [psychosocial models of connection and support](#). The [Inter-Religious Council of Liberia](#) worked with its government to start a [Religious Leaders’ Ebola Response Task Force](#). Many worked across Christian and Muslim groups and with traditional religions. Religious leaders were able to spread messages about the disease in religious services, model good practice to their communities, interpret medical information through religious teachings to help explain the need for the control measures, and provide immediate assistance, both material and psychological, for those in need. The increased engagement with religious and community leaders also led to greater trust between health professionals and communities, and community engagement and awareness of the causes and symptoms of the disease in general.

The question now is how much have these lessons been learned. Elsewhere, [we have written of some of the main lessons that can be taken from that Ebola response](#). In Ebola response in DRC, there was [already evidence in 2019](#) that some of the lessons about working with religious actors had not been learned, with a lack of engagement and coordination happening again. Of course, COVID-19 is occurring at an unprecedented scale, meaning that some of the lessons are not so easily transferable. The WHO, alongside many other agencies, has put out guidance materials, somewhat like the guidelines in 2014. But as guidance without specific country implementation strategies, it is hard to understand what effect they have had. Religious engagement is occurring, but at varying levels from country to country, and the next hurdle of the vaccine rollout is a forthcoming test of the extent and commitment to this engagement.

### *Further Reading*

The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) has a [dedicated resource page](#) that links to many of the pieces of research and fairly comprehensive overviews have been written by [Katherine Marshall](#) and others.

Beck, Claire. “The Crucial Role of Faith Leaders in the COVID-19 Vaccine Roll Out,” *ABC* (January 27, 2021). <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/religionandethicsreport/the-crucial-role-of-faith-leaders-the-covid-19-vaccine-roll-out/13094248>.

### *Partnering Across Religious–Secular Institutional Divides in COVID–19 Vaccine Rollout: Risks and Possibilities*

**Azza Karam, Religions for Peace**

Faith-based and faith-inspired NGOs are among the top global humanitarian responders. Some of

these have long shed their faith-inspired capes (Red Cross and Red Crescent, for example), others have names that reveal various levels of religious affiliation—or not (Caritas, World Vision, and Islamic Relief, for example). Despite the immense breadth of their shared knowledge, networks, and experiences, more often than not, religious humanitarian actors tend not to cooperate or collaborate. A case in point was the response to the outbreak of the pandemic in New York in March 2020. A faith-based organization (FBO) of significant repute set up a temporary intensive care unit in Central Park because the emergency needs far surpassed the supply which both governmental and private sector entities were serving, at the best of respective abilities.

But when two other FBOs (from a different religious background) offered support for this initiative, they were turned down, in spite of the overwhelming need that was still present. While faith-based actors are on the front lines of COVID-19 relief efforts, as they are on all humanitarian emergencies, they are not renowned for their collaboration.

This situation is slowly starting to change, however. Before COVID struck, a ground-breaking rapprochement between the Lutheran and Catholic churches took place. A historic rapprochement was also celebrated between the Holy See and the entire alignment of Orthodox and Protestant communities represented by the World Council of Churches. With the onset of the pandemic, a joint thesis on the value of Christian collaboration in COVID times was also issued—providing theological and lucid treatises that called for a “whole of Christian ethos” response to healing this troubled and wounded world. However, a good 12 months into the pandemic, there is yet to be any significant uptake of joint practical responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

In response to this gap in coordinated efforts, Religions for Peace set up a Multi-Religious Humanitarian Fund, intended to pool financial resources of diverse faith communities to serve the shared demand together. This initiative received at best lukewarm responses from faith leaders.

And yet, at no point in time have more UN bodies (including UNICEF, UNHCR, UNEP, WHO, UNAOC, UNOPG, UNAIDS) and other multilaterals (World Economic Forum, for example) reached out—almost simultaneously—to FBOs, seeking collaboration to spread health and educational messaging among wide constituencies, and documenting the unique roles of FBOs, than in this last year. A recent World Health Organization report, for instance, outlined the important role religious institutions played in the past in getting Turkey’s refugee population vaccinated against many other diseases. They noted that these faith actors were important in reaching out, informing, and directing the millions of people that make up the country’s refugee population.

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes that pit religion in opposition to science, many religious leaders are keen to influence worldwide awareness in relation to the virus and the vaccine and insist on reaching all those currently marginalized. As an example, the unequal distribution of vaccines across the world—referred to by some as “vaccine nationalism”—is a major focus of religious leaders’ efforts to counter misinformation, urge political and business leaders to leave no one behind, and commit to promote confidence in taking the vaccines (if and when available). The religious leaders are arguing that access to COVID vaccines, like the disease they are targeting, should transgress borders, ethnic divides, gendered and racialized identities, religious differences, and any and all vested interests of the few. As these issues affect all of the world’s peoples, many religious leaders and institutions are heeding the call for their advocacy and voice.

A key challenge for policymakers (not to mention the media), is to ensure that these multifaith contributions to global health, well-being, and the common good are duly acknowledged, not ignored—with attention only directed to the problematic aspects of public religion and religious engagement. This is part of “right-sizing” religion—paying attention to both the positive and the negative, giving due

attention to religious leaders and movements where significant, while at the same time not exaggerating their importance. The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity for diplomats to put these insights into practice.

## *Government, IGO, NGO, and FBO Partnerships in Rolling Out the Vaccine*

**Olivia Wilkinson, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities**

[Conversations](#) started last year, but efforts are now in earnest to work in partnerships to roll out COVID-19 vaccines. As partnerships with faith actors are not new in immunization work, those of us involved in faith engagement in global health see partnerships with [faith actors as critical](#).

Globally, UNICEF and WHO lead many of the efforts. UNICEF is a key implementer of COVAX and will be delivering many of the vaccines around the world, thanks to its previous experience as [the single largest vaccine buyer in the world](#) (for routine immunizations to children). At the end of March, WHO and UNICEF participated in a workshop with FBOs as part of the UN's Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development's Multi-Faith Advisory Council. This was a sharing session where partners exchanged ideas and examples of how to advocate for and work with faith actors in vaccine rollout. Both UNICEF and WHO are also bringing out guidance for faith partnerships and COVID vaccines soon.

At country levels, the picture is still somewhat emerging. There are a few notable efforts, with some more advanced than others based on the rate of vaccine rollout in their context. Yet every country can start thinking about faith engagement now—even in early planning, faith actors can help advise on potential challenges in community engagement and be links to faith-based health facilities for cooperation, for example.

In the United States, the Faith4Vaccines initiative is currently focusing on the United States but with the aim to build lessons for other countries. [It is building a growing base of interest and support, including links with the White House](#), and is gathering information from around the country about the ways in which religious leaders and their communities have been involved. There is an increasing number of examples of [religious buildings being used as vaccination sites](#). There have also been multiple [webinars](#), at local, regional, and national levels, to provide answers on information (and misinformation) from health professionals for religious leaders, with particular attention to reaching underserved communities, such as outreach through Black churches.

In Kenya, faith actors have been involved in several key councils ([the Christian Health Association of Kenya is on the National COVID-19 Vaccines Steering Committee](#), for example). Much of the work from faith actors has been on advocacy toward governments and IGOs to ensure fair and equitable distribution. In Kenya, it is no different with, for example, [the National Council of Churches](#) calling for equity in vaccine distribution in the country. [A conference at the end of March](#) focused on faith and science in relation to COVID vaccines. Organized by the All Africa Conference of Churches and the African Council of Religious Leaders - Religions for Peace, the event brought together African health scientists, theologians, and health and development professionals from UNICEF, WHO, and other agencies.

While this brief summary is far from comprehensive, it provides a snapshot of quickly evolving processes around the world. Two key points emerge: faith actors are organizing and advocating for their involvement in vaccine rollout and multilateral and bilateral organizations that recognize the importance of faith engagement are keen to work with faith actors on vaccine rollout—a promising start that must now be translated into continued real-world action.

# THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

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Stacey Gutkowski, King's College London

Stressing the common religious ancestry of Arabs and Jews, the Abraham Accords signed by Israel and four Muslim-majority states since August 2020 signal intent but do not guarantee deeper ties. Their future depends on U.S.-Iranian relations, intra-Gulf Cooperation Council dynamics, and a just solution for Palestine.

## *Key Development Alert*

The Abraham Accords are an addendum to the Trump administration's signature policy prescription for Palestinian-Israeli relations, *Vision for Peace* (2019) and *Peace to Prosperity* (2020). They revisit an earlier strategy used by U.S. mediators during the 1990s to simultaneously advance peace with Palestinians and Arab neighbors Syria and Jordan. This new strategy looks further afield, to "Muslim" states not formally at war with Israel. It formalized tacit cooperation between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, who have successfully sold the technological and financial advantages to populations acquiescent to post-Arab Spring authoritarian upgrading. Morocco and Sudan have endorsed it, and Kosovo has opened formal diplomatic relations with Israel. The accords have received a mixed reception among signatory state populations and religious leaders not aligned with regimes.

The Abraham Accords revisit an earlier 1990s U.S. mediation strategy to simultaneously advance peace with Palestinians and neighboring Syria and Jordan. This new approach looks further afield, to "Muslim" states not formally at war with Israel. The accords have received a mixed reception among signatory state populations and religious leaders not aligned with regimes.

In stressing the common heritage of Semitic peoples, the accords strike a discursive blow against exclusivist Arab and Jewish national frames which emerged after the 1917 Balfour Declaration, deepening with multiple Arab-Israeli wars. Such cultural framing is novel. Israel's previous political agreements were framed as *realpolitik*. The Oslo II agreement with the Palestinians (1995) pragmatically addressed access to and protection of holy sites (particularly Jewish holy sites). The Abraham Accords are a kind of hybrid between these agreements and Jordan's *A Common Word Between Us and You* (2007), a statement of intent for good relations between Muslim and Christian religious leaders, but with royal (state) endorsement.

Religion is often presumed to have natural peacebuilding properties, both by believers and secular policymakers, despite global evidence to the contrary. The accords' discourse reflects U.S. post-9/11 policy language, which stressed religious freedom, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue, and which Arab regional allies have repurposed in their Western-facing foreign policy discourse. However, the accords' cultural frame also acknowledges increasing salience of religious identity politics in the region, both among Arabs and Jewish-Israelis.

Arab politics have been shaped by Islamization since the 1970s. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990s drained oxygen from leftist opposition movements, opening further space for Islamists of various creeds, both Sunni and Shia, quietist and jihadist. Where regimes (monarchies and republics) have perceived Islamist competition to have grown too robust, they have sought to recapture popular legitimacy by emphasizing their Islamic credentials and aligning with leading clerics. Against this backdrop of Islamization of the political sphere, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Iranian cross-border activism gave oxygen to the political salience of sectarian identities at sub-national and regional levels. Sect identity gained further momentum after the 2011 Arab uprisings. In parallel, Jewish religio-ethnic national idioms have taken on greater salience in mainstream Israeli politics since the 1980s, alongside religionization of society. Successive coalition governments, from 2009 onward, have relied on religious parties' backing.

## *What's at Stake?*

The future of the accords depends in part on whether the Biden administration decides to support the Trump administration's 2019 Vision for Peace or lets it wither on the vine. The two initiatives must be understood in tandem. Of particular religious relevance is the vision provision protecting access to the Holy Esplanade and Jerusalem's other holy sites for "worshippers of all faiths." Settler activists who have been gradually eroding the interreligious *modus vivendi* in Jerusalem since the 2000s with the tacit consent of the Israeli government may take heart in this provision, where Palestinian activists seeking to "defend Al Aqsa" see further threat. Domestic politics in both Palestine and Israel will also be a key factor. Notably, the accords had a mixed reception among the influential Yesha Council of religious Zionist rabbis, upon whose support most center-right and right-wing political parties in Israel depend.

## *Looking Ahead*

The accords may offer new possibilities for further recognition of Arab-Jewish (Mizrahi) heritage, identity, and practice, within Israel, Morocco, Bahrain, and Sudan. Beyond trade and tourism, the accords' success will be measured in reduction of racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism in the signatories' media and popular discourse. Such progress hinges on just resolution for Palestinian sovereignty and end to occupation.

## *Further Reading*

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# RELIGION IN A NON-RELIGIOUS WAR: THE CONFLICT OVER NAGORNO KARABAKH

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Hratch Tchilingirian, University of Oxford

## *What's at Stake?*

The instrumentalization of religion—especially Islam by Azerbaijan in foreign relations—in the non-religious Nagorno Karabakh conflict could further deepen the differences among the parties in the conflict and in the region, and make a final resolution and reconciliation even more difficult.

## *Background & Key Developments*

The conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno Karabakh—a 4,400 sq. km enclave within the internationally recognized boundaries of Azerbaijan that was an autonomous region in Soviet Azerbaijan, with a population of about 150,000—goes back to the early twentieth century. Toward the end of the USSR, a full-scale war erupted in 1991 after the Karabakh Armenians declared independence. A ceasefire was brokered by Russia in May 1994, following which the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group became the main forum for negotiations, co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France. The crux of the conflict has been Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and Karabakh Armenians' right of self-determination. Since 1992, negotiations have focused on reaching a "grand political agreement" between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, but for nearly three decades, the talks have not led to a settlement.



The conflict between majority-Shia Azerbaijanis and Christian Armenians is not religious in nature. Yet since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Karabakh conflict has been variously presented, largely by the media in the West, as an ethnic rivalry between “Christian Armenians” and “Muslim Azerbaijanis.” Even as both sides to the conflict over the years have persistently rejected such characterizations, religion continues to be instrumentalized, especially in foreign policy and international relations, extensively by Azerbaijan and by the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia.

While by and large Azerbaijani society is secular and, notably, mostly Shia, over the years Baku has mobilized its diplomatic and state resources to gain the support of countries, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, as a “fellow Muslim country,” as well as through its membership in multistate organizations. Since 1992, when Azerbaijan joined the Organisation of the Islamic Conference—a club of 57 Muslim states—statements in support of Azerbaijan have been issued at every OIC summit. “Islamic responses” to the Karabakh conflict—a discourse embedded in religious language and beliefs—have crossed over local and regional lines in various intensities. Domestically, even as the growth of Islam has been closely watched and controlled by the secular state, religion still interacts with other more prominent political and social factors—especially regarding Karabakh.

In the early 1990s, clerics and religious groups *outside* Azerbaijan amplified the religious dimension of the conflict and presented it as a conspiracy against Islam. During the first Karabakh war, Rovsan Badalov, the former commander of mujahideen fighters, called on his fellow Azerbaijanis to launch “a holy war” against the Karabakh Armenians. The Azerbaijan Karabakh Liberation Movement called for a jihad as “the only way to fight against the Armenians.” Notably, religiously inspired militancy seems to be tolerated by the state when used as a device for defining the “other” as an enemy and for mobilizing support toward an “Azerbaijani solution” to the Karabakh conflict—but not when it is used for sociopolitical critique of Azerbaijan or its government.

For Armenia and Karabakh Armenians, the appeal to religious affinities has been more on the domestic and limited foreign relations levels rather than as part of strategic foreign policy by the state. During the military operations last year, certain Armenian clergymen in Karabakh supported the war efforts through religious and nationalistic language. Traditionally, Armenian society has viewed “Christian Russia” or Greece or “Christian Europe” as sympathetic to their national causes. Reportedly, even some former non-commissioned Greek officers were willing to fight on the Armenian side during the second Karabakh war. Some Armenians from the diaspora had volunteered to fight in the war and were considered “foreign fighters” by Azerbaijan. However, this perception is changing within Armenian society in view of the fact that during the recent second Karabakh war, the sentiment behind such expectations did not seem to be reflected in international responses to the conflict.

### *Looking Ahead*

Religion is most likely to remain a critical factor in Azerbaijani-Armenian relations in the post-war period. Baku continues to strengthen its ties with the Muslim and Turkic world to further isolate Armenia and gain full control over Karabakh proper. Other ongoing issues of relevance include access to religious sites, particularly centuries-old Armenian churches and monasteries in territories that have come under Azerbaijan’s control. Some of this also entails a politics of historical representation, with Azerbaijan presenting Armenian Christian monuments in the territory as “Caucasian Albanian”—implying that they belong to Christian ancestors of the Azeri people.

Looking forward, religion could also be a factor in the wider regional context. Turkey’s expanding military and political presence in the Caucasus might extend to the religious sphere, as Ankara in recent years has openly championed the “cause of Islam” globally, and this could pose a challenge to Shia Iran. For its part, Russia has not hesitated to leverage its Christian heritage and strong ties to many of the eastern

churches. It is likely that religion will continue to be instrumentalized in this region to pursue political and diplomatic interests rather than for the pursuit of peace.

### *Further Readings*

Tchilingirian, Hratch. "Christianity in Karabakh: Azerbaijani Efforts at Rewriting History Are Not New." *EVN Report* (November 22, 2020). <https://www.evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/christianity-in-karabakh-azerbaijani-efforts-at-rewriting-history-are-not-new>.

"The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer," International Crisis Group (February 12, 2021). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>.

## **UAE-QATAR RELIGIOUS RIVALRY COOLS AS SAUDI ARABIA SEEKS RESOLUTION**

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**Kristin Diwan, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington**

### *Key Development Alert*

On January 5, 2021, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, joined by Egypt, signed a joint declaration of cooperation, effectively ending the four-year boycott of Qatar by the quartet of countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. This shift in policy was encouraged by the Trump administration and led by Saudi Arabia. The other quartet partners demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for the move, although all have agreed to resume flights and to re-establish diplomatic relations with Qatar.

The reasons behind this abrupt Saudi turnaround are complex and somewhat opaque. There is the Saudi desire to signal goodwill to the incoming Biden administration. The need to focus on the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic is urgent, especially as Saudi's ambitious plans for transformation require foreign visitors and investment.

Yet it may also be the case that the domestic political gains from the standoff have already been achieved: The Islamist movements the Saudi government accused Qatar of abetting have been politically neutralized, tarred as both extremist and traitorous. Will the Qatari-Emirati rivalry, based in similar disagreements about the political role for Islamist movements and ideology, now be eased?

### *What's at Stake?*

Rivalries among wealthy Arab Gulf states have intensified in the past several years, fueled by differences over geopolitics, political ideologies, and the ambitions of new generation leaders.

Religious politics—specifically support for Islamist movements—has been at the center of the Qatar-UAE dispute, with Saudi Arabia as the main pivot and prize. Qatar's leadership has used its influence through media and diplomacy to cultivate support among a broad variety of populist forces, including Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood activists and intellectuals. In contrast to this grassroots approach, the UAE has cultivated religious scholars who preach deference to rulers, and who support their interfaith initiatives and tolerance agenda at home and expansive ambitions abroad.

These ideological positions are tied to new strategic alignments with the main non-Arab regional powers: Qatar drawing closer to Turkey, and the UAE forging new ties to Israel. Their competition over regional primacy has placed them on opposite sides of conflicts, from Syria to Yemen, and

into East Africa and the southern Mediterranean. The first steps at resolution of the Gulf dispute represent a step back from this polarization and may signal an opening to broader conflict resolution in the region.

### *Looking Ahead*

Neither the Qatari nor the Emirati camp has repudiated its ideological and political commitments. The emirate's open ties with Israel are further evidence of both the depth and political intent of its interfaith agenda, despite some defections from associated scholars. Qatar is unbowed and maintains its media reach and political ties to Islamists and political dissidents. Yet there is no doubt that both sides have been chastened by the years of grinding regional conflicts.

The break in the standoff comes as all of the states are turning inward. The regional power of the Islamist populists who once threatened to hold power in several states has crested, diminishing their political appeal for Qatar. Economic challenges at home will force the UAE to rationalize its military engagements abroad. Its loyalist clerics are being directed toward new domestic educational initiatives. It may be that the new priorities of health and human security, as well economic welfare, present more opportunities for cooperation than the previous intractable political postures.

### *Further Reading*

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## ISLAM AND THE WAR IN YEMEN

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### **Stacey Philbrick Yadav, Hobart and William Smith Colleges**

The war in Yemen has altered the organizational coherence and practices of the country's largest Islamist political organization, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah). For over two decades, Islah served as the most organized political opposition to the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. It operated party offices in every governorate of the country, held robust internal elections, and developed the leadership capacities of younger men and women through specific youth and women's institutions. There is every reason to expect that Islah will play a role in any negotiated post-war settlement, both in design and in implementation.

### *Key Development Alert*

Six years of war—and the tumultuous period that preceded it—have hollowed out Islah as a political party. In the 2000s, the party was characterized by distinct internal factions, each of which controlled some component of the party's institutional apparatus. A centrist Muslim Brotherhood-aligned cohort directed the Political Bureau, which made everyday decisions about policy and worked closely with other members of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) opposition coalition. A socially conservative faction led by a well-known tribal shaykh, Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, was heavily represented in parliament, and

a third faction composed of Salafi conservatives was represented most visibly by Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, chairman of the party's internal Shura Council.

The JMP, which supported but did not drive the protest movement in 2011, was the primary beneficiary of the negotiated agreement sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council and United Nations. This framework ensured Islah a place in the new cabinet and a substantial share of representation at the National Dialogue Conference that would determine future reforms. At precisely the same time, Islah (and other JMP members) shut down internal party elections and closed younger members out of leadership roles. Diminished opportunities within the party along with deteriorating security conditions across the country contributed to the growth of so-called "Islah militias" even before the war commenced, with frequent clashes between these militias and armed supporters of the Houthi movement in areas north of Sana'a. The term is misleading, however, since Islah-aligned militias are not coordinated on a central basis, but reflect instead the fracturing of the country into a range of geographically organized militias associated with the politics of their local leaders. Islah-aligned militias enjoy the political support of the Saudi forces and the displaced government (of which Islah is a part), but the United Arab Emirates and its local allies, as well as the Houthis, remain hostile to Islah.

### *What's at Stake?*

Opportunities to engage in non-violent forms of political activity under the banner of Islah do not currently exist in Yemen. Peacebuilders' expectations about what Islahi representation means in any peace process or post-conflict reconstruction plan should recognize that the Islah party is not the centrally coordinated and coherent political organization that it once was. While Islahis—as people with distinct policy priorities—may endeavor to engage the peacebuilding process, much organizational capacity has been lost, and it is unclear that representatives of Islah as a party can carry through on negotiated commitments. Any program of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration that seeks to address Islah-aligned militias will need to contend with this organizational fragmentation as well.

### *Looking Ahead*

Neither the Qatari nor the Emirati camp has repudiated its ideological and political commitments. The emirate's open ties with Israel are further evidence of both the depth and political intent of its interfaith agenda, despite some defections from associated scholars. Qatar is unbowed and maintains its media reach and political ties to Islamists and political dissidents. Yet there is no doubt that both sides have been chastened by the years of grinding regional conflicts.

The break in the standoff comes as all of the states are turning inward. The regional power of the Islamist populists who once threatened to hold power in several states has crested, diminishing their political appeal for Qatar. Economic challenges at home will force the UAE to rationalize its military engagements abroad. Its loyalist clerics are being directed toward new domestic educational initiatives. It may be that the new priorities of health and human security, as well economic welfare, present more opportunities for cooperation than the previous intractable political postures.

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# CONFLICTING RIGHTS? FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AND GENDER EQUALITY

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Marie Juul Petersen, Danish Institute for Human Rights

## *Key Development Alert*

When the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief presented his 2020 report on “gender-based violence and discrimination in the name of religion or belief,” it was met with [sharp criticism](#) from, among others, the Vatican, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and American evangelical NGOs. The report was labelled a “sort of ideological colonialism,” denounced for “the numerous references that recommend that freedom of religion or belief and conscientious objection must be surrendered for the promotion of other so-called ‘human rights.’”

The opposition to the report is indicative of broader tendencies of privileging “religious freedom” over other human rights, especially those related to gender equality. At both international and national levels, governments, religious institutions, and civil society actors justify gender inequality and discrimination by claiming the need to protect “religious feelings,” “traditional values,” “religious harmony,” “conscientious objection,” “human dignity,” “natural order,” or “unalienable rights.”

In multilateral fora, we are witnessing strong pushbacks against increasing protections for the human rights of women and LGBTQ persons. Examples include backsliding on the Istanbul Convention and the watering down of UN Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019) on ending sexual violence in conflict. Before its welcome termination this January, the global “gag rule” crippled the services offered to vulnerable girls and women in many parts of the world by organizations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

At the national level, examples include the refusal of goods and services to LGBTQ persons, bans on comprehensive sexuality education, restrictions on access to reproductive health services, gender discriminatory family laws, harmful practices, and prohibition of certain forms of sexual orientation. Gender equality advocates, including faith-based ones, frequently experience restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief. In Malaysia, for instance, a fatwa has been issued against the women’s rights NGO Sisters in Islam on the grounds that they “deviate from Islam.” In Poland, three LGBTQ activists are awaiting trial, accused of blasphemy for having depicted the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo over her head. Social hostilities and harassment are also common. In a recent case from Burundi, an imam was kidnapped and (non-fatally) poisoned as a punishment for his involvement in women’s rights activism.

## *What’s at Stake?*

The antagonistic conception of freedom of religion or belief and gender equality has consequences for individual rights-holders that go beyond gaps in legal protections. It impacts the broader sociopolitical contexts in which laws, policies, and development interventions are made and implemented, contributing to a lack of understanding of and sensitivity to the needs, experiences, and specific vulnerabilities of people who experience discrimination on the grounds of both gender and [religion or belief](#). This also limits the usefulness of otherwise well-meaning outreach initiatives such as the [Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#).

In the long run, insistence on the incompatibility between freedom of religion or belief and gender equality has the potential to destabilize and delegitimize the broader human rights system. Laws, policies, and inter-

ventions that prioritize one right with the strategic intention of minimizing or even de-legitimizing other human rights will ultimately erode the persuasiveness and normative force of human rights in general.

## *Looking Ahead*

Recent years have witnessed increasing opposition to the conception of freedom of religion or belief as inherently oppositional to gender equality. All over the world, religious feminists, LGBTQ activists, and other faith-based actors challenge religiously conservative actors' monopoly on FoRB, insisting on their right to interpret and practice their religion in a way that is consistent with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. The global Muslim women's rights movement Musawah, for example, challenges OIC member states' sharia reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on the grounds that they violate women's rights, including their right to freedom of religion or belief. [Kenyan LGBTQ activists of faith](#) question the discrimination and exclusion they face from their own churches, arguing that this constitutes a violation of their right to worship. In Argentina, the Pentecostal pastor [Garbiela Guerreros](#) has advocated for the right to safe abortions from the perspective of freedom of religion or belief: "Our bodies are sacred territory and in that [lie] our self-determination and religious freedom."

Among governmental special envoys and offices engaged in the international promotion of freedom of religion or belief, there is growing attention to gender equality. Norway funds an online course on freedom of religion or belief and women's rights, hosted by the [FoRB Learning Platform](#); the Netherlands is supporting projects in Burundi and Kenya; and Denmark has spearheaded the establishment of a working group on gender equality within the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. At the UN level, we have also begun to see greater engagement with freedom of religion or belief among the bodies mandated to monitor rights related to gender equality. The CEDAW Committee, for instance, [increasingly applies freedom of religion or belief](#) as an argument against gender discriminatory religious laws and practices. Likewise, the Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on [Sexual Orientation](#) and [Gender Identity](#) has referred to freedom of religion or belief in his reports and statements.

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## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DEMOCRACY AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

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In South Asia, entrenched social and political cleavages involving Muslims or particular groups of Muslims have shaped state efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

In India and Kashmir, the pandemic has exacerbated forms of *Muslim marginalization*: blaming Muslims for carrying the virus to India; using the virus as a pretext to restrict public protests targeting the abrogation of constitutional autonomy in Muslim-majority Kashmir.

In Pakistan and Afghanistan, the pandemic has also reinforced patterns of *Muslim resistance*: encouraging opponents of Pakistan’s government to criticize pandemic-based restrictions (restrictions on collective prayers, for example) as “un-Islamic”; allowing the Afghan Taliban to criticize Afghan government failures to contain the virus while, at the same time, offering rhetorical support for a global public health campaign.

If there is one pattern that has prevailed across all of the countries in South Asia, however, it is a pattern in which official “emergency” measures introduced to contain the virus have steadily undermined the legitimacy of elected governments.

### *Key Development Alert*

Across South Asia, there is a risk that COVID-19 analysts will focus on state capacity more than policy legitimacy, inadvertently supporting anti-democratic models focused on expanding emergency powers—not in the service of “public order,” but rather in the service of a new emergency framed by “public health.”

### *What’s at Stake?*

Like climate change, COVID-19 has produced more intense versions of already-familiar challenges in South Asia: stronger “hurricanes” of Hindu majoritarianism in India, longer “droughts” restricting civil liberties in Kashmir, new “floods” of religious protest in Pakistan, hotter “fires” of religious authoritarianism in Afghanistan. Like climate change, however, what began as a steady *quantitative* change has slowly shifted in the direction of a *qualitative* transformation: to press the metaphor, an erosion of democracy and a rising tide of emergency-based authoritarianism.

To counter this shift, more robust forms of oversight targeting state-based emergency powers are needed—not only with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, but in general. This oversight should come from judges, journalists, and civil society groups—especially, journalists and civil society groups that understand the experience of marginalized communities.

## *Looking Ahead*

Where local actors struggle to balance executive power, including recent efforts to “stretch” executive power under the cover of COVID-19, international assessments of judicial performance with a focus on defending fundamental rights *against* emergency powers are critical. (A recent [U.S. Supreme Court decision](#) defending religious rights against pandemic-based emergency powers in the United States is an unexpected but helpful example in this regard.) Where domestic criticism of judicial action has become increasingly [constrained](#), as it has in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, international efforts may be particularly important.

Where the future of democracy itself is uncertain, as it is in Afghanistan, or incumbent legislatures have become increasingly difficult to distinguish from ambitious executives, as in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—indeed, where legislators struggle to uphold international standards in which emergency powers are expected to remain (a) [non-discriminatory](#), (b) proportionate, and (c) narrowly time bound or subject to frequent review—it is often necessary to press *beyond* judges in favor of media scrutiny. But again, [censorship and media-based disinformation](#) within South Asia remain enduring concerns.

Within South Asia, a shift in the direction of emergency power may help state officials defeat the virus (via lockdowns, for example). But, as with so many emergencies, these officials may succeed in defeating the virus only to discover that they have killed off their democracies in the process. Extreme vigilance is required to ensure that the pandemic does not advance existing trends putting South Asia’s commitment to democracy at risk.

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