



Strategic Note on Religion & Diplomacy

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Introduction

Welcome to the 2020 *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.

COVID-19 and Religion

Religious communities are critical actors in the COVID-19 emergency. Responses include action to cancel or adapt physical gatherings or (less positively) to maintain them, changing pertinent practices (like serving communion), actual and planned messages (positive and less so), countering (or fostering) discrimination and related violence, and active outreach and support to vulnerable and poor communities. Given wide diversity of leadership and communities, robust and tailored strategic engagement is needed for the immediate future. In times of turmoil positive religious support should provide vital aid to communities. Reflection should begin now on the religious dimensions of how to engage in recovery, address the longer-term impact, and draw out lessons for future action.

Key Development Alert

Many religious communities and their leaders are immediately concerned in responding to global, national, and community action on COVID-19. Many but not all physical religious gatherings are being suspended to ensure physical distancing, but communities are scrambling to identify alternative ways to offer spiritual and practical support to adherents and broader communities. Adverse financial as well as social and psychological implications are already on the radar of many religious communities that are seeking to address the particular needs of their community members related to this pandemic.

The potential for positive religious community support for global strategies, including through effective messages and the parallel potential for misinformed communication, are both substantial. Faith communities' knowledge about and active involvement with vulnerable communities can be drawn on in the development of response strategies. Also important is the need for religious communities to develop means to serve the ongoing spiritual needs of their community members in line with safe public health practices, including around pastoral care, death and funeral rituals, and daily ritual and worship life.

What's at Stake

A rapidly growing set of actions and statements in response to the pandemic by religious actors, including global interfaith and intrafaith entities, attest to their deep concern and potential to organize and inspire their communities. It appears that many public health officials (national and international) appreciate the need to engage religious communities and their leaders. There is, however,

room for more specific measures to translate that awareness to practice.

Fragmented religious institutions and widely varied national landscapes make across-the-board responses difficult. Leading global icons like Pope Francis, Sheikh bin Bayyah, the Aga Khan, the Dalai Lama, and Patriarch Bartholomew can join in strong common messages, as can hierarchical institutions like the Catholic Church and large faith-inspired institutions like World Vision, Sarvodaya, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and Caritas Internationalis. States with strict control over the religious space and more hierarchal traditions can also more easily issue directives to ensure that religious practices adhere to new public health standards that respond to the pandemic.

Much of the practical action, however, will come at the community/ denomination/ congregation level, underscoring the importance of outreach and good communication. Here again, some religious traditions may have an advantage over others. The Roman Catholic church—by virtue of its structure, organization, and internal communications mechanisms—is better situated to disseminate centralized public health guidance that has a reasonable chance of reaching local communities than Sunni Islam, which lacks centralized authority structures and messaging capacity. Nonetheless, active outreach and collaboration that reaches wide audiences in meaningful ways can enhance impact. With looming immediate and long-term challenges for vulnerable communities, faith community insights and ideas are needed to develop a comprehensive, effective, and sustained response from governments and the public health community. Failure to engage faith communities has the potential to worsen situations at different levels.

A significant risk associated with the global COVID-19 emergency is increased or worsened conflict, violence, and social tensions. This includes tendencies towards extremist and populist groups or movements. It bears note that some are voicing hopes for a potential for coming together, seeing "one human family" and bringing out goodness in humanity. Nonetheless, fears and mistrust which are rampant in many societies are already contributing to rising stigma and discrimination directed to specific groups. Reports of rising gun purchases in the United States are worrying. Episodes of religious minorities or ethnic groups being blamed are already apparent (Donna Rachel Edmunds, ["Coronavirus is a Zionist plot, say Turkish politicians, media, public,"](#) *Jerusalem Post*, 18 March 2020). Shia pilgrims to Iran have been harassed as they return to countries where they are minorities, while foreigners in the Central African

Republic (CAR)—including CRS staff—have faced backlash after an Italian priest returned from Italy infected. A specific concern is potential for heightened ethnic/religious hatred and violence or targeting particular actors because of specific religious practices.

Looking Ahead

Priorities for focus include:

- Explore, in each country or sub-region, how religious actors are responding to the pandemic and identify meaningful ways to ensure strong communication and potential collaboration with public health officials.
 - Reaching out by pandemic coordinators and other policy leaders to interfaith institutions and established coordination. They should engage deliberately with existing and enhanced communication channels. The powerful “messaging” capacity of faith institutions can support policy advocacy at all levels
 - Pay attention to and address the desire for reliable information about evolving knowledge about COVID-19 and specific faith responses and innovative practices.
 - Work with faith leaders to counter false information, some of which may be disseminated by fellow faith leaders or community members.
 - Ensure that public health officials and faith leaders are collaborating in ensuring how to adapt religious practices to abide by safe practices, and to ensure the spiritual needs of those being treated are being met.
 - Identify and build on faith community efforts, especially those that involve interfaith outreach, to address fear, stigma, and discrimination.
 - Explore practical ways to cooperate with faith communities to identify and support the most vulnerable, in individual communities and globally, especially in lower income and conflict affected countries and among forced migrants, and in countries with high levels of refugees or displaced communities.
 - Faith-linked health providers need specific attention and support to ensure that they have access to critical supplies and are part of national health strategies.
- Start deliberate reflections on longer-term issues highlighted by the current crisis and include, for example, emphasizing health over disease and reaching proactively to those “left behind.”
 - Ensure that faith dimensions are reflected in multilateral discussions at United Nations, G7, and G20
 - Monitor to ensure that the pandemic response of states, as much as possible, does not drive further authoritarian control over religious practices and speech; rather, encourage collaboration and the easing of “emergency” controls after the pandemic.
 - Monitor carefully and ensure effective response to incidents and trends pointing to violence and social tensions, in concert with religious actors. It will be important to follow ways in which religious communities respond (including in an inter-religious basis) to mitigate such trends and how effective they are.

Further Reading

Religions for Peace Statement on COVID-19. <https://rfp.org/standing-together-in-spirit-and-with-actions-religions-for-peace-statement-about-the-coronavirus-covid-19/>

KAICIID statement: COVID-19 AND RELIGION: NEW WAYS TO WORSHIP AND SERVE THOSE IN NEED. <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/covid-19-and-religion-new-ways-worship-and-serve-those-need>

“Ramaphosa asks religious leaders to help contain spread of coronavirus.” <https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2020-03-19-ramaphosa-asks-religious-leaders-to-help-contain-spread-of-coronavirus/>

COVID-19 Faith Response Platform https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FLxwvN6ICTxWWYOWRiv9sBLgf7v0vstsSzV7_o_1-B8/edit

India’s Anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment

India’s Hindu Nationalist government is attempting to redefine who qualifies as an Indian citizen, sparking fears that Muslims will be rendered stateless.

Key Development Alert

In December 2019, both houses of the Indian Parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act

(CAA), which makes religion the basis of providing citizenship to refugees from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The act grants citizenship to Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, and Jains refugees who entered the country by December 31, 2014. The conspicuous exclusion of Muslims, and omission of neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar has raised questions over the Act's intention and constitutional validity. While framed in the garb of concern of refugees, the Act reflects intentions to target minority groups in India.

The CAA comes on the heels of propositions by the Narendra Modi led government to implement a pan-India National Register of Citizens (NRC) to identify illegal immigrants and "doubtful citizens" who will then be rendered stateless. NRC has already been conducted in the state of Assam, which excluded 19 million persons from citizenship. Many of these persons were declared "foreigners" and sent to detention centres, even when they were able to show documents like voter IDs.

What's at Stake

The CAA and NRC are especially worrisome when seen as conjoined projects under the Hindu nationalist government's anti-minority ambitions. Actors of the ruling party have made several pronouncements to suggest that even if religions other than Muslims were to be excluded from the NRC, the CAA will help them retain citizenship. The messaging has made it explicit that while NRC creates paths to statelessness for the undocumented, CAA, like a "Muslim net" creates paths to citizenship for preferred undocumented groups.

Since December 2019, India has seen continuous protests against the CAA and NRC, and now the National Population Register, which is the first step of the pan-India NRC. Protests have been met with police brutality and violence. In the BJP-ruled state Uttar Pradesh alone, 22 Muslim men were killed by the police, including minors and persons not protesting, and Uttar Pradesh police has been reported to have indiscriminately barged into homes in Muslim localities to ransack, threaten, and hurt people. In February, a protest site in Delhi was attacked by a mob, and soon violence engulfed the North East part of the city. Fifty-six people were killed, most of them Muslims. Notably, President Trump visited Delhi during this period but refrained from commenting. Several reports have noted the complicity of Delhi Police in the pogrom.

Looking Ahead

The Modi government has refused to go back on the CAA, even amidst protests. Meanwhile, several states have passed resolutions against the CAA and

NRC. Contradictory, and ambiguous statements by different actors of the ruling party have become the order of the day, and even Prime Minister Modi has expressly lied on record, claiming that there are no detention centres in India.

Seen amidst the backdrop of Indian government's approach towards minorities and democratic processes—whether it is the virtual shutdown of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, the arbitrary and rampant discontinuation of internet services across the country, the increasing violence against minorities, unchecked police brutality, and the government's periodic anti-Muslim statements—the CAA and NRC are by far the most potent and dangerous projects which threaten the continued existence of India as a secular and democratic republic.

Further Reading

<https://scroll.in/article/947116/scroll-investigation-amit-shahs-all-india-nrc-has-already-begun-with-the-npr>

<https://scroll.in/article/952175/home-ministrys-answers-on-citizenship-and-protests-hide-much-more-than-they-reveal>

<https://scroll.in/article/935337/detention-in-assam-a-baby-and-old-man-died-despite-their-families-having-proof-of-citizenship>

Religion, Sectarianism, and Politics in Lebanon: Is It Really "Game Over"?

What's at Stake?

Have recent popular upheavals and protests in Lebanon really started to go beyond traditional sectarian cleavages and ignore them? Are we about to bury the deeply rooted but widely despised "political sectarianism" that has characterized the Lebanese political system since the inception of the country? If this is still far from being the case, a new and interesting dynamic is at play.

Background

Lebanon's 15 year-long war ended in 1989 with an agreement, the Taif Accord, that could not uproot the age-old sectarian construct. Instead, it revisited and consolidated some of its features, while, paradoxically, proclaiming the possibility of its abolishment.

The implementation of the new constitution—in the shadows of both ongoing Syrian presence and the rise to power of sectarian warlords—led to deeper and stancher forms of sectarianism, and laid the

foundation for a new set of sectarian cleavages in the country's political and societal evolution. While each community and its leadership spent a decade and a half struggling to establish preeminence in the system, regional dynamics inaugurated by the Iraq War (2003), the assassination of PM Rafik Hariri (2005), and the strongly sectarian tone of the eventual Syrian civil war, all gave a transnational flavor to this Lebanese friction. These events also largely structured the divide between the rival March 14 and March 8 movements that was still operational, however imperfectly, on the eve of the October 2019 revolt in the country.

Key Development Alert

In parallel to the increased sectarianization of politics, a rampant sociological sectarianization was also developing—although one frequently in tension with a marked societal counter-movement towards de-sectarianization. Be it in the fields of education, labor organization, business alliances, habitat, or private life, sectarianization both advanced and receded in interesting ways from 1990 to 2019. This is the background against which the civil society's surge and upheaval occurred in October of last year, and which continues to unfold today. At first glance, one senses that the street is crying out for an end to corruption and, simultaneously, also for the de-sectarianization of the country in all respects.

Looking Ahead

A closer look would nevertheless call for more caution, even if such a discourse is strongly present in the younger and more radical segments of the revolt movement. This is where the resilience of the political class—suddenly united above and beyond its internal cleavages, but for the sake of mere survival—comes into play. This is also where the regional dimension of sectarian struggles, between Iran and its proxies on one hand and their adversaries in the region and beyond, continues to bear on Lebanon. Faced with a slogan (“All means all”) that aims at toppling the entire political class and, ultimately, its sectarian infrastructure, Lebanon's political elite is waging its counter-revolutionary battle largely by rejuvenating and reactivating still-existing feelings of sectarian loyalty and affiliation. They are increasingly injecting into this battle the fear that entire communities and their resources are now at stake and must be defended. It is an old and tired trick but all signs suggest that among Lebanon's many tough challenges ahead, dealing with this one will be the toughest.

Further Reading

Joseph Bahout, “The Unraveling of Taif: The Limits of Sect-based Power-sharing in Lebanon” in Frederic Wehrey (ed.), *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Sara Fregonese, “Elements of Contestation: Sectarianism as Extractive Violence and Lebanon's Revolution,” Sectarianism, Proxies & De-Sectarianisation (SEPAD) Project, Lancaster University, <https://www.sepad.org.uk/announcement/elements-of-contestation-sectarianism-as-extractive-violence-and-lebanon-s-revolution>

The Trump Peace Plan: Endorsing Jewish Settlements

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which began as a conflict over territory in the aftermath of the world wars, has increasingly taken on religious overtones since the late 1960s. Israel's victory in the 1967 war and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and other areas were interpreted by some in the religious Zionist camp as God's liberation of the Biblical Land of Israel, and they set out to settle there. In the late 1980s, the Palestinian Hamas emerged on the scene, promoting a radical Islamist interpretation of the conflict with the Jewish state. Today, religion plays an important role in shaping identities and preferences both in the Israeli and the Palestinian societies.

Key Development Alert

On January 28, 2020, US-President Donald Trump unveiled his long-awaited peace plan for Israel/Palestine. It came at a time when Israel was caught in an unprecedented political impasse. The third national election within one year on March 2, 2020, again did not result in stable majorities. Neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud party) nor his major contender Benny Gantz from the newly-formed Blue and White-party have yet succeeded in forming a coalition government. Gantz refuses to join a unity government with Netanyahu who is indicted on corruption charges. His advances to the Arab Joint List which won 15 Knesset seats are being blocked by individual lawmakers from his party who reject a minority government supported by Arab parties. To date, it remains open whether Gantz succeeds in forming a government or a fourth election has to be held.

Religious issues and different religious groups in Israel were directly involved in this impasse. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's centre-right government had collapsed in early 2019. One of the

reasons was a dispute between coalition partners over a draft law, supported by ultra-Orthodox parties, which would exempt the ultra-Orthodox population from national service. Then-Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Chairman of the secular “Our House Israel” party which mainly represents immigrants from the former Soviet Union, strictly opposed the law. In the run-up to the next elections, Netanyahu garnered the support from ultra-Orthodox as well as religious and secular right-wing parties; initially, he even sought to include the Kahanist party “Strength for Israel,” which stands in the tradition of the late rabbi Meir Kahane whose Kach-party was barred from elections in 1988 for inciting racism. While the ultra-Orthodox parties seek to secure their constituency’s special status and treatment – for example, exemption from military service – the religious Zionist parties care most about the expansion and security of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East-Jerusalem, some of them propagating annexation of all occupied territories.

What’s at Stake?

The Trump administration’s peace plan envisions Israeli sovereignty over all Jewish settlements, which currently comprise almost 650,000 Israeli citizens in the West Bank and East-Jerusalem. Already in November 2019, the Trump administration had announced that it officially breaks with the long-held view that the settlements are illegal under international law. The peace plan allows for the annexation of about 30 percent of the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley, while suggesting to swap out Israeli territory equal to 13.5 percent of the West Bank to what is referred to as a Palestinian state – a demilitarized, territorially non-contiguous form of sovereignty in the remaining areas of the West Bank.

After the release of the peace plan, Netanyahu immediately declared his intention to annex parts of Judea, Samaria, and the Jordan Valley, but later announced he would wait until after the elections due to U.S. requests. His supporters from the right-wing religious Zionist camp pressured the Prime Minister to keep his promise and implement annexation before the elections in order to “seize the historic opportunity”; at the same time, they vehemently oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state and the proposed transfer of Israeli territory. So far, no annexation has been announced. Netanyahu’s contender, Gantz, declared that he would annex the Jordan Valley and parts of the West Bank as head of government, but in coordination with the international community. The Palestinians rejected the peace plan even before it was unveiled; afterwards, President Mahmud Abbas called the plan a conspiracy and cut ties with Israel and the

U.S. The EU also rejected the U.S. plan because it departed from internationally agreed parameters.

Looking Ahead

The Trump peace plan dismisses previous U.S. policies regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plan by and large endorses the Netanyahu government’s positions on key issues and opens the door for far-reaching annexations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The settlement project in the occupied territories, once started by a small group of Jewish religious radicals in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has become a state-sponsored policy which will probably result in the re-drawing of national borders in Israel’s favour, officially approved by the U.S. Some observers argue that President Trump has launched the peace plan not least to secure support in the coming U.S. elections from conservative Jewish and Evangelical voters who strongly back the Israeli government and the settlements. Palestinians were at no point involved in negotiating the peace plan. Since the presentation of the plan, protests and violent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces have intensified.

Further Reading

“The Trump Plan - A Plan for Annexation, Not for Peace. Why is the US plan so harmful?” Peace Now, January 2020, <http://peacenow.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Trump%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9CPeace%E2%80%9D-Plan -A-Unilateral-Resolution-Is-No-Solution-2.pdf>

Aaron David Miller, “Middle East Peace Plan is Donald Trump’s Ultimate Deal Fantasy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 3, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/03/middle-east-peace-plan-is-donald-trump-s-ultimate-deal-fantasy-pub-80962>

Foundation for Middle East Peace: Settlement Report [The Trump Plan Edition], January 31, 2020, <https://fmep.org/resource/settlement-report-january-31-2020/>

Gershon Hacohen, “A Historic Opportunity that must be Seized,” Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Perspectives Paper No. 1, 421, January 30, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/1431-A-Historic-Opportunity-that-Must-Be-Seized-Hacohen-English-final.pdf>

Special Focus: Iranian Religious Soft Power

In light of recent tensions between Iran and the United States and the ongoing regional rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh, the TPNRD Advisory Council asked Dr. Simon Mabon of Lancaster University to reflect on Iran's use of religion as an instrument of statecraft.

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Iran sought to position itself as a leading player across the Middle East. In support of this, Ruhollah Khomeini, the architect and Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic expressed an intention to provide support to Muslims across the world, particularly those under the yoke of oppression, and to spread ideas of revolution and resistance.

The provision of support to groups across the region in support of revolutionary goals - most notably Hizballah and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain—increased Iranian influence across the Middle East while also increasing the perception of Tehran's influence on Shi'a communities in the region, albeit ignoring the influence of different seats of clerical power and ethnic differences. In Yemen, for example, Iranian support for the Houthi movement emerged far later than is typically assumed—around 2009—yet language barriers and ethnic rivalries have meant that Iranian training programmes are run by members of Hizballah to circumvent these tensions.

Yet Iranian influence extends beyond mere perception. The Islamic Republic has representatives in Shi'a communities across the region who follow the Supreme Leader, spreading the vision of the Islamic Republic across Shi'a communities. This is supported by a complex web of relationships cultivated by officials including the erstwhile head of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qassem Soleimani. Additionally, the provision of support to Iraqi political figures during Saddam Hussein's rule meant that following the toppling of his rule in 2003, Iran was able to shape Iraqi politics in accordance with its will.

Similarly, in Lebanon, the establishment of Hizballah gave Tehran a great deal of influence across the Levant which was then supported by the establishment of cultural centres across the south of the state in an effort to strengthen their position. This approach is co-ordinated with embassies across the region, seeking to promote resistance and revolutionary ideals, Islamic unity, and cultural outreach, albeit contingent upon the idiosyncrasies of local context that condition the capacity of Tehran to achieve its aims.

This combination of resistance, revolution, and Islamic unity helps Iran to transcend sectarian divisions, notably through its support for Hamas in their struggle against Israel. Narratives of supporting the fight against injustice and resistance—which feature prominently in Shi'a thought—resonate beyond the sect. Yet on-going support for Bashar Al Assad in Syria has eroded legitimacy derived from Iran's resistance narrative given the violent repression of opposition groups and protesters after the Arab Uprisings. Moreover, the response to Iran's own domestic population during protests across 2009 and 2019, where violence was used to crush the protests, dilutes Tehran's support for resistance movements and its efforts to battle injustice.

Ultimately, Iranian claims to Islamic piety are supported by a multi-faceted soft power strategy playing out across different challenges. While Iran continues to counter existing orthodoxies through supporting anti-status quo movements, contradictions stemming from on-going support for the Assad regime and treatment of its own protesters have had a dramatic impact on its cultural and religious influence across the Middle East and wider Muslim world. Iran's influence has unsurprisingly waned. It remains to be seen the extent to which the Islamic Republic can capitalise on the killing of Qassem Soleimani to reassert its resistance narrative, but these efforts will be conditioned not only by regional forces, but by domestic events across Iran.

The Role of Religion in the Political Crisis in Bolivia

Religious symbols and language played an important role in the political crisis before and after President Evo Morales resigned in November last year. The current interim president and presidential candidate Jeanine Añez, lifted a large Bible and claimed she brought it back to the presidential palace. Under Morales' presidency Bolivia became a secular state in 2009, independent from the historically dominating Catholic church. This led to a recognition of religious plurality and more equal opportunities for different Christian denominations and indigenous religiosities. The political landscape is currently marked by a religious discursive conflict between those who want to preserve the changes from the last 15 years, and those who want to "bring the Bible back into the Palace." The historical division between Catholics and Evangelicals has been bridged by right-wing conservative leaders from both confessions.

Key development alert

Around 70% of Bolivians identify as Catholics, close to 20% as Evangelicals, and the last 10% as not affiliated with any particular religion (Latinobarómetro 2018). The growth of new evangelical churches has been timid in Bolivia compared to neighbouring countries and their visible role in politics is quite recent). In the disputed general elections in November the Korean-Bolivian evangelical pastor Chi Huyn Chung (PDC, Christian Democratic Party) ended up in a third place. He is now running as a presidential candidate for Frente para la Victoria (PVC). The interim president Jeanine Añez is a conservative evangelical Christian, openly using prayer, religious rhetoric, and the Bible to express her stands. A third key figure in the upcoming presidential election, scheduled for 3 May 2020, is Luis Fernando Camacho, a conservative Catholic who became the main leader of the social protests against Morales. He brought the Bible with him in mobilisations and he entered the presidential palace kneeling with the Bolivian three-coloured flag and thanking God. Some of his supporters simultaneously burned the Whipala, the other official Bolivian flag representing the indigenous cultural and religious heritage and identity of the country. These strong symbolic actions added fuel to the fire for Morales' supporters.

What's at stake?

In line with a broader recognition of and visualisation of indigenous cultures and groups in Bolivia under Morales' presidency, religious practices became accepted in public and political life

through interreligious ceremonies. Many Bolivians, particularly from rural highlands, have felt an increased recognition and acceptance of their identities as both indigenous and Christians, both Catholics and Evangelicals. Conservatives in both camps however reject beliefs and practices directed towards Pachamama (Mother Earth) as pagan. The public role of conservative and charismatic Christianity has therefore met both joy and fear among Bolivians.

While many rejoice the "return of the Bible" and the claims that Jesus is now back to govern, many indigenous people in the highlands see this as a brutal reminder of how Christianity first came to Bolivia: with the Bible and weapons and the aim of "civilizing" the indigenous. Supporters of Morales fear that the rights they gained during his presidency might be lost again. Divides based on urban or rural residency, ethnicity, and class are fuelled by a religious dimension that intensifies the sentiments involved in the political crisis over the future of Bolivia.

Looking ahead

Conservative Catholics and Evangelicals are also allied in political issues such as rights of LGBTQI and sexual and reproductive rights. Conservative religious views on sexuality and gender threaten legal frameworks and inclusion promoted in the recent decades. Recognising both the depth of the religious symbols and the impact of conservative ideas will be important in efforts to analyze Bolivian politics in the years to come.

Further reading

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- Brady McCombs, "Bolivia Religious Debate: The Bible versus Andean earth deity", *AP News*, January 25, 2020: <https://apnews.com/5b2c57adfe878163be4b0288890d7bf3>
- Tom Phillips, "'Satan, be gone!': Bolivian Christians claim credit for ousting Evo Morales", *The Guardian*, January 27, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/27/bolivian-christians-evo-morales-indigenous-catholic-protestant>

Religious Tolerance as a UAE Public Relations Strategy

Key Development Alert

In December 2019, the UAE convened the sixth annual Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which gathered religious leaders from around the world to discuss the promotion of tolerance.

Background

The Forum is one of several manifestations of the UAE's stated commitment to religious tolerance. The Forum also released the Marrakesh Declaration in 2016, which drew upon the Prophet Mohammad's affirmation of interfaith toleration in the Charter of Medina. The declaration was hailed by European governments and the U.S. for using a foundational Islamic document to condemn atrocities committed by ISIS against religious minorities. The Forum, and organizations like it, frequently issue such declarations. But given that statements from state-affiliated religious authorities are unlikely to impact the behavior of groups engaged in violence, what is their intended purpose?

What's at Stake?

Such declarations offer an opportunity for members of the official religious establishment to reassert their religious authority. Decades of rising literacy combined with the spread of new technologies—from cassettes to social media—and the popularity of unofficial, unaffiliated religious figures have eroded the authority of state affiliated religious leaders. So declarations provide a public forum in which to try to re-establish their relevance.

Such gatherings and statements implicitly contribute to the view that blames Islam, specifically a "misinterpretation" of Islam, for violence. If a corrupted form of Islam is seen as culpable, leaders in the Middle East can avoid acknowledging the ways in which political and economic inequalities in their own states reinforce authoritarianism, domestic coercive apparatuses, and state-sponsored brutality, all of which can provoke violent responses from those targeted. From the perspective of Arab dictators, indicting a certain interpretation of Islam for extremism deflects attention from their mistreatment of political activists, while allowing them to play the role of savior by promoting so-called "moderate Islam," and demonizing Islamists—their political rivals—as "terrorists."

Looking Ahead

The UAE in particular has deployed a sophisticated public relations strategy, portraying itself as a bastion of liberal values, while suppressing all domestic dissent and fostering violence abroad, including in Yemen and Syria. Saudi Arabia has been less adept at projecting an image of toleration, but has attempted to follow the UAE's lead. Authoritarian governments cannot be permitted to perpetuate fear of religion, specifically Islam, as a means of distracting from their own responsibility for perpetuating the conditions that can foster violence and extremism. Political leaders from outside the region must maintain skepticism of sophisticated campaigns to disguise authoritarian regimes as champions of toleration, and maintain pressure on such regimes to address human rights violations domestically and desist from fomenting violence elsewhere in the region.

Further Reading

Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies

<https://peacems.com/>

Annelle Sheline, "[Declaration Proliferation: The International Politics of Religious Tolerance](#)," Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. 11 July 2019.

Malaysia's 2019 Islamic Summit: An Alternative to the OIC?

At the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Turkey announced that they would collaborate to combat Islamophobia. Not long after, the three governments began plans to convene the Kuala Lumpur (KL) Summit in December to address political, economic, and social challenges affecting the Muslim world.

Key Development Alert

Shortly before the KL Summit, Saudi Arabia accused Malaysia setting up a bloc of Muslim states to oppose the Saudi-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The fact that Malaysia invited Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani also drew the Saudi's ire. On 17 December, Saudi Arabia responded by pressuring Pakistani Prime Minister into withdrawing from the KL Summit—just a day before the event's opening ceremony. With Khan's acquiescing to the Saudi's, the KL Summit lost one of its hotly anticipated speakers. The timing of Saudi Arabia's pressuring, the high-level participation of Saudi Arabia's major rivals, and the substance of its

accusation indicate that Malaysia-Saudi Arabia ties have soured significantly.

What's at Stake?

Before the 2018 Malaysian General Election (GE14), relations between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia had long been close. Indeed, the Najib Razak administration joined the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemeni Civil War. While Najib consistently brought attention to humanitarian crises affecting Rohingyas, Syrians, Iraqis, and Palestinians, he shied away from mentioning the Yemeni refugee crisis. Furthermore, Najib's Defence Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, had characterized Iran as a threat to Islam. Saudi Arabia and Malaysia also opened the King Salman Centre for International Peace (KSCIP) to collaboratively address Islamist extremism. As such, observers consider the KL Summit to signal a realignment in the Muslim world's strategic landscape.

Looking Ahead

While Malaysia's position towards Saudi Arabia is certainly a new development, it is important not to overstate its implications for Muslim world geopolitics.

For one, the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government's frustrations with Saudi Arabia are a function of domestic personality politics. Current Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's feud with Najib dates back to roughly 2013 and escalated in 2015, following the 1MDB scandal. While Najib was accused of diverting nearly US\$700 million from 1MDB into a personal account, he insisted that the money was a donation from Saudi Arabia—a claim that the Kingdom backed. It is therefore unsurprising that Mahathir has displayed his unhappiness with the Saudis publicly.

Second, it is an open secret in Malaysia's political circles that the 2019 Summit was poorly organized, lacked planning, and diplomatically incompetent. The fact they failed to persuade most of Saudi Arabia's allies to attend the event suggests that a Malaysia-Iran-Turkey-Qatar bloc lacks geopolitical legitimacy.

Third, Saudi Arabia remains an important partner for Malaysia. It has leverage over Malaysia through its provision of Hajj (pilgrimage) quotas. Malaysia's trade with Saudi Arabia is also far greater than trade with Iran and Qatar. Finally, Saudi Arabia withdrew its support for Najib's donation claim. This could go a long way towards restoring bilateral normalcy between both countries, especially if Najib is convicted in the 1MDB trial. As such, it is highly

unlikely that the KL Summit will, over time, emerge as an alternative to the OIC.

Further Reading

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