



POLICY BRIEF

Key Findings and Recommendations on Safeguarding Religious Sites, Houses of Worship, and Communities



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The Network
for Religious
& Traditional
Peacemakers



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FOREWORD



In light of the rise of hate speech and crimes targeting religious sites and communities across Europe, the SOAR project has become a guiding mechanism on how to safeguard houses of worship and strengthen the collaboration between the European Union and its member states, security personnel and faith communities.

This project has prioritized the development of sustainable solutions to safeguard both physical and mental well-being of faith communities through the integration of capacity building actions, such as practical and tailored security trainings for the at-risk communities, including trainings specifically for women and youth. It has also underscored the need to ensure governments and their security agencies, in collaboration with faith communities, develop agreeable policy measures in which can be implemented and supported by faith communities at the grassroots level.

In recognizing global frameworks already exist, the SOAR project sought to bolster the United Nations Plan of Action on Safeguarding Houses of Worship, developed by the UN Alliance of Civilizations and global faith communities by integrating and advocating for Plan's recommendations and tools to relevant stakeholders, including member states and civil society on how to prevent attacks on religious sites.

On behalf of the project's consortium partners, we applaud the European Union for prioritizing these actions to ensure all communities in Europe have the right and ability to safely practice their religion or faith tradition. It is through the continued multistakeholder collaboration of the European Union and its member states, security personnel, faith communities and women and youth, that significant strides will be made to safeguard religious sites in Europe and be used as a guiding framework for other contexts to ensure the global community has the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi

Executive Director

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers



OVERVIEW

The following policy brief provides policy recommendations for the European Union, member states, and faith communities, as identified during seven national policy dialogues held throughout 2022 and 2023 as part of the European Union funded ‘Strengthening the Security and Resilience of At-Risk Religious Sites and Communities’ (SOAR) project. The national policy dialogues provided a safe space to promote collaboration and dialogue between local religious communities and national authorities, including law enforcement, to identify collaborative actions to enhance the protection of places of worship. The dialogues supported knowledge exchange and best practices among policymakers and religious communities in efforts to enhance local and regional networking and collaboration between the stakeholders. In addition, these dialogues provided a valuable opportunity to raise awareness and promote the implementation of the European Union (EU) Commission’s “Action Plan to Support the Protection of Public Spaces” and the “United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites.”

During the policy dialogues, several recurring themes emerged, including the need for increased funding, interfaith collaboration, and peer learning. Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of building networks between all relevant stakeholders, and consistently collecting data on attacks against places of worship across the EU.

This brief offers an analysis of the critical issues discussed in the national policy dialogues and highlights a series of practical recommendations that can serve as an effective framework for the development of future policy initiatives.

ABOUT THE SOAR PROJECT

The “Strengthening the Security and Resilience of At-Risk Religious Sites and Communities,” SOAR, project is designed to improve the protection, security, resilience and preservation of places of worship. The two-year program, funded by the EU ISF-fund and launched in April 2021, aims to address the security concerns of religious communities in seven EU pilot countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, and the Netherlands. SOAR follows a three-pronged approach to enhance security at religious sites. Firstly, baseline research was conducted to establish an understanding of the current policies and praxis frameworks in place to support advancing the security and safety of religious sites and places of worship in the pilot countries. It also shed light on the lived experiences and concerns of faith communities regarding the safety of their places of worship, and the prevalence and types of violence they face. Secondly, SOAR provides security training designed specifically for faith leaders, and women and youth worshippers, and risk assessments at selected religious sites are conducted. Thirdly, to enhance collaboration between the parties and share best practices and policy recommendations, SOAR facilitates dialogue between relevant stakeholders, such as faith communities, national and EU level policy makers and CSOs. A consortium led by Enhancing Faith Institutions (EFI), the Architects Council of Europe (ACE) and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers is implementing the SOAR project, supported by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) who is leading implementation of The United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites, In Unity and Solidarity for Safe and Peaceful Worship (2019).

BACKGROUND TO THE SOAR POLICY DIALOGUES

Over the past decade, the European Union has witnessed a notable surge in violent extremist movements and attacks targeting places of worship (POW)¹. In the aftermath of the Christchurch Mosque attack, which claimed the lives of 53 individuals, some faith communities in the EU started questioning their own levels of preparedness and awareness of their security. This relates not only to terrorist attacks, but also to threats, vandalism and symbolic forms of violence, i.e. acts that are non-physical but with the purpose of humiliating or hurting individuals or entire communities, such as painting swastikas, smearing blood etc. The SOAR project was developed through the realization that there is a lack of preparedness against attacks for many places of worship, and that local faith communities are in need of professional assistance and guidance in order to safeguard their POW and congregation.

Between November 2022 and February 2023, a series of seven online national policy dialogues, one for each of the SOAR pilot countries, were held. In these dialogues, relevant stakeholders including key experts and representatives from multifaith communities, policymakers, civil society organizations and architects specialized in Security by Design, were consulted and shared views and experiences from their local and national contexts. The key areas of discussion included collaboration between faith communities and public authorities regarding security and safety, primary challenges, and best practices. The aim was to gather relevant information to formulate practical policy recommendations for the European Union, member states' national and local policymakers, and faith communities.

Overall, the national policy dialogues provided valuable insights into the security challenges facing places of worship and the policies aimed at enhancing their safety and resilience. They brought closer together the multi-denominational representatives allowing to generalize the risks, threats, and opportunities for the places of worship across the faith boundaries.

While it was evident that increased efforts are needed to raise awareness about security and safety of places of worship, participants emphasized the risk of over-securitizing the issue, as overly rigid precautions could potentially make faith communities less secure by painting them as targets, even where there is no threat against them. In addition, over-securitization can have an inhibitory effect on the express of freedom of religion or belief by members of affected communities.



¹ Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator in Horizon Insights Journal, August 2020

KEY FINDINGS

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Funding was identified as the most pressing issue for faith communities in order to enhance their security and preparedness. Many representatives stated they were aware of the need for better security, in terms of both hardware such as doors and cameras, but also in terms of procedures and know-how, but lacked the necessary funds to obtain these resources. The dialogues accentuated a discrepancy between the public resources dedicated and available to faith communities, and the capacities of the faith communities to access them, in terms of awareness and knowledge on how to navigate the application process. Smaller faith communities particularly faced challenges accessing funding. Meeting requirements for risk assessments and lacking necessary infrastructure was identified, but also noting that many smaller faith communities have registered their sites as cultural centres, to avoid negative public attention, making them ineligible for funding intended for places of worship.

While there are faith communities that successfully have accessed government funding for security and have a close cooperation with law enforcement, there are risks for the communities who have not. There is the concern that lack of collaboration can exacerbate perceptions of inequalities. However, when faith communities are not supported or have access to resources, they can also feel the need to develop their own security systems, independent of the state. The development of parallel security systems is a high-risk situation that needs to be avoided.

Recommendations

For national authorities, local authorities, and policymakers:

- Develop funding mechanisms for the security of faith communities, with clear directives and eligibility criteria that take into account the diversity of faith groups and sizes. Ensure flexibility in the use of funding to reflect the unique needs of different faith communities. Funding needs to be provided on a sustainable basis and with a multi-year timeline.
- Make funding available also for smaller faith communities' places of worship, which may not be registered as religious sites but as cultural centres.
- Ensure that all faith communities have equal access to funding and support from the local and national security apparatus, to avoid the development of parallel security systems.

For faith communities and leadership responsible for community safeguarding and security policies:

- Engage in interfaith peer learning to draw lessons from other faith communities' experience and expertise with obtaining government funding for security.



ENHANCING AND FOSTERING LOCAL INTERFAITH COLLABORATION

Strengthening broader interfaith dialogue efforts and ensuring designated safe spaces for dialogue on security-related issues can be beneficial for each community. Attacks and threats are carried out against all faith communities in the EU, and as it becomes more prevalent it becomes normalized. This normalization of bias-motivated attacks, vandalism, and symbolic violence is a growing problem in the EU. The normalization results in spill-over effects, as it lowers the threshold for other communities to be attacked as well. In this sense, an attack on one faith community is an attack on all. Addressing attacks against other communities, engaging in interfaith collaboration, and avoiding a silo mentality counters the normalization of hate. Collective security thus becomes the aim, achieved through cooperation and collaboration. The policy dialogues highlighted significant variations in the levels of security awareness and preparedness both within and between faith communities, but also a willingness to share this knowledge and these experiences between communities.

Not only does interfaith relations and peer learning need to be strengthened, but particular attention needs to be placed on multi-stakeholder collaboration between local and national authorities and faith communities in regard to security. It is important that member states actively invest in this process and deepen interfaith engagement to ensure the security of all religious places of worship, be they targeted currently or not. However, it must also be recognized that some faith communities may prefer to keep this discussion within their own community and not invite other faiths or authorities into the conversation.

Recommendations

For the European Union:

- Promote opportunities for dialogue with faith communities and peer-to-peer learning to include security issues.

For national authorities, local authorities, and policymakers:

- Actively invest in facilitating interfaith dialogues and dialogues between security officials and faith communities, with a focus on security of places of worship. Stress the importance of participating even if there is no current threat against the community.

For faith communities and leadership responsible for community safeguarding and security policies:

- Foster both interfaith and intrafaith cooperation and dialogue, including on security issues. Take advantage of peer-to-peer learning and leverage the technical and specialist expertise of other faith communities, and their collaborating partners.



NETWORKS AND FOCAL POINTS

Designating focal points within networks and stakeholders is crucial in ensuring the security of places of worship in the EU. While security is the job of the state, it is a shared responsibility, and all stakeholders have different roles and need to be involved in protecting POW. The security needs of faith communities and local authorities, including law enforcement, may differ, therefore it is important to develop a dialogue to address these potentially divergent priorities. However, stakeholders noted that a central problem is a lack of awareness of who they should reach out to in other stakeholder groups. Many POW do not have an appointed focal point for security matters, and faith communities often do not know who to contact within local authorities. Establishing working relationships and a clear division of responsibilities between stakeholders and their focal points need to be considered as an on-going task between faith communities and local authorities, avoiding reactive-only responses. This practice is important not only in relation to serious incidents like terrorist attacks but also to other safety concerns, such as fire safety and general health, safety, and wellbeing in the place of worship.

Recommendations

For the European Union:

- Advocate for sharing of best practices between member states, policymakers and faith communities.

For national authorities, local authorities, and policymakers:

- Proactively designate focal points for each relevant department/stakeholder at the city or regional level to engage with faith communities and maintain regular communication with all stakeholders to share updates on focal points. Communication needs to be both formal and informal and frequent.

For faith communities and leadership responsible for community safeguarding and security policies:

- Appoint security focal points to regularly liaison with local authorities on issues related to security and their place of worship.
- Ensure that the focal points reflect the diversity of the faith communities, including gender and age diversity.
- Actively engage in dialogue with local authorities and advocate and inform on community perceptions of security issues. This includes establishing strategic partnerships with local residents' associations and groups.



TRAININGS AND PREPAREDNESS

The dialogues brought forth that there is a clear need and demand for capacity building for people working at places of worship. They often host large gatherings but lack the necessary training and certifications to ensure the security of the attendees. Providing security trainings for faith communities is thus crucial for ensuring the safety and preparedness of POW. Trainings needed include areas such as security assessment and management for large gatherings, incident response planning, medical emergencies, and fire safety. It is important for these trainings to be provided in collaboration with local authorities and law enforcement, and in line with national policies and regulations. It is crucial that these trainings are gender sensitive, and also include the needs and perspectives of youth. By being provided these trainings, faith communities can better prepare themselves for potential security threats and ensure the safety of those attending their gatherings.

Recommendations

For national authorities, local authorities, and policymakers:

- Mandate places of worship to have incident response plans in place and provide support and training to implement it.
- Introduce a plan of action, in collaboration with faith communities, to train and certify faith communities on security assessment and management.
- Take into account the different needs of women, youth and other marginalized groups, and design trainings specifically tailored for these groups.

For faith communities and leadership responsible for community safeguarding and security policies:

- Actively cultivate relationships with local authorities and law enforcement in order to collaborate on issues regarding preparedness and safeguarding measures.
- Promote awareness of safeguarding practices and capacity-building among youth and women at the community level, including offering trainings targeted towards women and youth.
- Develop a preparedness plan in the event of an attack to ensure physical and mental wellbeing of the faith community.



DATA GATHERING

During the discussions, stakeholders noted a lack of comparable data on attacks against places of worship and faith communities across the EU. Member states use different definitions and methods of reporting, making inter-state comparisons impossible and resulting in a lack of coherent overview of the situation. The explanation for this lack of coherence lies in the fact that member states' different national legal systems place different requirements on the form of reporting. The general recording of crimes, the structure of the police force and other institutions also differ. Additionally, victims of bias-motivated crimes may be hesitant to report incidents, compounding the issue. Taken together, these factors make it very difficult to compare data from different countries, and thus to address the issue effectively. Without a clear and streamlined process for collecting evidence-based data, authorities are not able to take appropriate measures to counter the growing threat. The EU should strive to establish a common understanding on definitions and key concepts when it comes to hate-crime reporting and data on attacks against places of worship. Furthermore, it should try to reach for a set of shared parameters of recording of incidents and share the collected data with relevant stakeholders.

Recommendations

For the European Union:

- Establish and promote an EU-wide consensus for key concepts, definitions, and procedures for reporting hate crimes and attacks against places of worship. Encourage data sharing with relevant stakeholders to enhance transparency and facilitate cross-country comparison.

For national authorities, local authorities, and policymakers:

- Support and adopt the consensus and implement it in reporting systems. Designate resources for capacity building to use the new concepts.

For faith communities and leadership responsible for community safeguarding and security policies:

- Encourage and facilitate faith community members to report incidents.

SECURITY-BY-DESIGN (SBD)

Security-by-design is an important concept in building design and maintenance, as it enables architects and engineers to plan and integrate physical security measures into the building's design and construction process at an inception stage. This approach involves identifying potential security risks and vulnerabilities and developing solutions to mitigate them from the outset. These measures should take consideration of local context and be tailored to the specific needs of the building, depending on factors such as the building's location, and the level of risk. By adopting a security-by-design approach, faith communities can ensure that their POWs are well-protected against physical threats such as theft, vandalism, and terrorism but also provides a safe and secure environment for congregants and visitors. The SBD concept is new and has not been adopted nearly as widely as it should be. The EU and its member states should push for the inclusion of SBD principles as part of the work to protect places of worship and other public spaces.