Introduction

On March 15, 2019, a Facebook Livestream captured a 28-year-old Australian man shooting indiscriminately at worshippers in the Al Noor Mosque, in the New Zealand city of Christchurch. Moments later, the gunman continued his rampage at the Linwood Islamic Centre, killing more. In total, the attacks injured 49 people and killed 51 people, making them the deadliest mass shootings in modern New Zealand history. A week later, in the wake of the Christchurch attack, the United Nations, through its United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC), began creating a plan of action to safeguard religious sites.

A month later, on April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday, suicide bombers in the Sri Lankan city Colombo attacked churches, luxury hotels, and residential areas, killing 259. Subsequently, the Islamic State claimed that the bombers "were Islamic State fighters," and a video released after appears to depict the elusive Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi praising the attackers.

Religious violence is nothing new. These two attacks only extend the long trail of bloodshed perpetrated by humans throughout history in the name of religion. However, these two attacks, and in particular, the Sri Lankan one, have highlighted the continuing vulnerability of religious sites to the tribalistic and violent whims of specific individuals. While it is crucial to note that it is challenging to end religious violence comprehensively, reacting to such attacks with tepid indifference would only mask the issue and delay any progress.

Thus, it has come to the General Assembly Third Committee's attention to ensure that the Plan of action comes to fruition.
Definition of Key Terms

Religious violence

Religious violence refers to violent behaviour whereby religion is either the object or subject. Religious violence can be committed by religious groups, or by non-religious groups against a religious group. Religious doctrines and guidelines set in texts and scriptures can also prove to be a motivating factor, and so can aversion to different beliefs.

Religious sites

A religious site is a place which has substantial importance to a particular religion. This includes houses of worship, community centres, shrines, sacred land, effigies, graveyards, remnants of destroyed sites and pilgrimage sites.

Some religious sites may meet a UNESCO World Heritage Site selection criterion and thus gain the classification as one. Such sites serve to illustrate that religion and culture can often be intertwined, which makes the preservation of these religious sites all the more essential.

Hate speech

The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, defined hate speech as "messages in public discourse and the media, including social media, which spread hostility and encourage people to commit violence against specific communities, often based on their identity". For example, Holocaust Denial is considered a form of hate speech in Belgium and is strictly illegal under national law.

However, there is still considerable debate regarding the implementation of hate speech laws. Critics argue that such laws curtail the freedom of speech and limit productive debate. Nevertheless, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which has been ratified by 171 state parties, states that "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law".

Discrimination

Discrimination is the unfair treatment of individuals because of their gender, race, or beliefs. Some member states shroud their discriminatory practices under a veneer of nebulous laws or explanations. For example, Myanmar has argued that the Rohingya people are illegal immigrants, while the longstanding belief for their persecution is that they are Muslims in a Buddhist-majority state.
Secularism

Secularism is the principle of separation of the state from religious institutions. In general, most democracies of the world govern on this principle, to allow the free exercise of religion.

At the same time, the principle does not come without controversy. Specific laws to enforce secularism, such as France's law banning face-covering in public areas, have faced criticism. Other countries, like Iran, have official state religions and govern as a theocracy.

Sectarianism

Sectarianism refers to an excessive attachment to a particular sect or party, especially in religion. It is a term often used to describe phenomena which are often the result of bitter relations between opposing factions. It is not a governing principle.

Prejudice

According to UNESCO, prejudice is "made up of unfavourable or discriminatory attitudes (not actions) towards persons of different categories". There are many forms of prejudice, such as Islamophobia (prejudice against Islam or Muslims) and anti-Semitism (prejudice against Jews), which may serve to be a strong motivation for an individual to commit religious violence.

Background Information

Established measures to protect religious sites

There lack international standards to protect religious sites. The United Nations does not yet have a specific plan to safeguard religious sites. Often, this responsibility has come down to NGOs.

NGO activity will be discussed later in the "Previous attempts to solve the issue" section. It is essential, however, to understand the bedrock of the religious violence threatening the safety of religious sites, written below.

History of religious violence and discrimination

Religious violence and discrimination have permeated all societies throughout history. Such divisions have ripped the world apart many times and have threatened the safety and existence of religious sites.

Unfortunately, these divisions still exist today. Looking back and reflecting on the history of them allows us to deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding religious violence and how to better address the issue of safeguarding religious sites.
**Violence against heretics and non-believers**

In general, many religions have committed violence against heretics and non-believers. These attitudes stem from the belief that heretics and non-believers are a threat to the integrity of the religion, mainly if it is a missionary one delivering truths from a divine entity. For these religions, the truth(s) that the divine entity has revealed is the most important truth there is, therefore, denying or altering this truth is extremely dangerous, warranting extreme action (i.e. violence).

The concept of battling heresy has been historically significant in Christianity, where this intolerance manifested itself in the persecution of various heretic movements (e.g. Cathars), and the Thirty Years' War, for example.

However, Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau eventually made the questioning--and even the rejection--of religion--acceptable. The growing change towards secularisation in much of the western world then paved the path towards higher religious tolerance (not all western countries are religiously tolerant), leading to the near-absence of violence against heretics in Christianity that we see today.

The concept of combating heresy has not been as historically important in Hinduism, as it has no central doctrinal authority; and in Buddhism, despite there being different branches.

In Islam, certain groups, like the Alawites, were historically persecuted as heretics. However, what is more notable in Islam is the Sunni-Shia divide, often the crux of various sectarian conflicts raging in the Middle East.

**The Sunni-Shia divide and associated religious violence**

In Islam, Sunni-Shia history spans many centuries. The division between these two factions of Islam is said to have originated from a dispute regarding Prophet Muhammad's successor as leader of the Muslim world (Caliph). Abu-Bakr, a close Companion to Muhammad, was chosen to succeed the Prophet. Some others believed that the son-in-law and cousin, Ali, should be Caliph. This dispute was the origin behind the two words "Sunni" and "Shia"; more information regarding the origin of the words can be found in the appendix section.

Ali eventually became fourth Caliph following the assassination of the third Caliph, Uthman. A series of internal disputes then led to battles and challenges to the title of Caliph, widening the Sunni-Shia split.
Before continuing, we should acknowledge that the above paragraphs are a gross oversimplification of the history between Sunni and Shia Islam, for easier reading. Comprehensive summaries of the Sunni-Shia divide can be found in the appendix section.

Also, we need to note that the Sunni-Shia divide was never as violent as those between the Catholics and the Protestants, despite widespread media coverage of constant violence in the Middle East. Instead, this rift is an undercurrent that is observable in various wars, and often involve two opposing regional superpowers: Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia is mainly Sunni; Iran is mainly Shia. Since Ayatollah Khomeini led an Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have grown. Iran has repeatedly accused Saudi Arabia of not governing legitimately according to Islam doctrine and has acted to try and lead popular Islamic uprisings around the Middle East. As a result, Saudi Arabia has grown increasingly fearful of a popular uprising occurring in Saudi Arabia, which would overthrow the governing monarchy. Various proxy wars have involved the two powers supporting opposing factions, with the Saudis supporting Sunni militias and the Iranians supporting Shia militias. Again, we have to re-emphasise that various other reasons have led to these wars; religion only acts as an undercurrent.

In Syria, Sunni rebels, backed by Saudi Arabia, are fighting against the Alawite (non-Sunni) government of Bashar-al Assad in a Sunni majority country. Iran has come to the Syrian government's defence, with military support and funding for the Shia militant group Hezbollah.

In Yemen, Saudi Arabia is trying to rollback a Houthi takeover of Yemen, and restore power to the now-exiled president, Abdu Rabbu Monsur Hadi, who is a Sunni Muslim. The Houthi Movement mainly comprises of Shia Muslims.

With recent escalating tensions between the USA, Saudi Arabia and Iran, could the Sunni-Shia divide play a role as a more significant undercurrent prompting more violence? Such a question must be a point of consideration in order to safeguard adequately various religious sites in the Middle East at risk from the ravages of war. Some notably affected sites include the Umayyad Mosque in Syria, which suffered a significant amount of destruction during the Syrian Civil War.
Christian-Muslim violence spans many centuries. Christians and Muslims most notably clashed during the Crusades, over disputes regarding claims to the Holy Land.

Today, Christian-Muslim violence is observable in several countries. In the Philippines, a predominantly Christian country, Muslim terrorist groups with ties to Islamic State have targeted Catholic churches in suicide bombings and various attacks in the Southern regions of Mindanao and Bangsamoro.

In Nigeria, Christians and Muslims each constitute approximately half of the population. Violence has broken out between the two factions, mainly in part due to the involvement of the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram. The so-called "cattle war" has exacerbated the violence, whereby semi-nomadic Fulani tribes, who are mostly Muslim, have been seizing cattle in the Middle Belt, a region which is mainly Christian. The Fulani herders, who traditionally pasture their cattle in northern Nigeria, have been forced to migrate due to climate change. In the process, this has worsened relations between the two religious groups, particularly raising fears amongst the Christian population that there is an overwhelming effort by Muslims to overturn the secular state and proselytise. At the same time, certain Shia minority groups have complained of being oppressed by the Nigerian military. These fears were confirmed when the Nigerian military opened fire at unarmed protesters who belong to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, a Shia group, on October 29, 2018.

In Egypt, the Coptic orthodox minority, who currently comprise an estimated 10 per cent of the population in a Sunni Muslim majority country, has been historically persecuted. A series of suicide bombings of Coptic Orthodox churches on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017, manifested this historical persecution in the most blatant form of violence. Human Rights Watch also reports that many Copts are fleeing their houses due to the increasing presence of Islamic State, particularly in the northern Sinai Peninsula.

In Iraq, Christians who have lived there for centuries are facing marginalisation and discrimination, particularly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the associated rise of Islamic State. Before the invasion, there were as many as 1.4 million Christians in Iraq. Today, fewer than 250,000 remain.

Moreover, in Sri Lanka, there are lingering fears amongst the Christian group, a religious minority in a majority Buddhist state.
Hindus and Muslims have a historically violent relationship, most clearly seen in the two neighbouring countries of India and Pakistan.

The acrimony between the two religious groups dates back centuries ago, over disputes regarding contested holy land. For example, according to traditional Hindu belief, the Indian city of Ayodhya was the birthplace of Lord Ram—revered by Hindus as the ideal man. Furthermore, Hindus believe that a magnificent shrine supposedly stood upon Lord Ram's birthplace until Babur, founder of the Mughal dynasty (and a Muslim), ordered its destruction. This historical outrage underpins Indian society and explains the general Hindu aversion towards a Muslim, and why some right-wing Hindu nationalists consider Muslims as "foreigners" or "invaders". (Today, in Ayodhya, Hindus are funding efforts to redress this desecration by building a new temple dedicated to Lord Ram. The building site also acts as a pilgrimage site.)

The British strategy of "divide and rule"—promoting division amongst the local people to ensure less resistance to imperial rule—inflamed these tensions. As the strategy began to fail amidst more significant calls for independence, Britain passed the Government of India Act 1935, giving Indian provinces a new political structure, while still retaining full authority over the colony. Local governments for Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, were established. In the ensuing elections, Jawaharlal Nehru (a Hindu), and his Indian National Congress party obtained a substantial majority, with the All-India Muslim League, in the minority.

The elections only worsened divisions between Hindus and Muslims. The Muslims felt that the elections only enabled greater oppression in a Hindu state, where violence against Muslims was not uncommon. Eventually, there were more calls for an independent Muslim state. A general strike by Muslims in 1946 then turned violent, leading to the massacre of thousands in Calcutta, in the infamous Great Calcutta Killings. Britain soon announced their withdrawal from India.

Then in 1947 came the agreement to partition along religious lines: with a mostly Hindu India, and a mostly Muslim Pakistan. Britain hastily hurried their exit, as a result of severe devastation resulting from the Second World War, and left ensuing chaos. There were violent riots and mass migration across the borders by people fearing religious persecution in the newly created states. Approximately one million people died. The partition also created the controversy that is Kashmir, and led to more religious violence in that region, as exemplified by the 1947 Jammu Massacres.
Rampant Hindu-Muslim violence has continued ever since in both countries.

Hindu nationalism died down following the January 1948 assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu nationalist, but various events fuelled a growing resurgence, observable today. The 1969 Gujarat riots, which started after an attack on a Hindu temple, led to a violent reprisal against Muslims. The assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi further fuelled a growing Hindu nationalist fervour and has paved the way for the country's increasing deviation from the secular state conceptualised by Mahatma Gandhi.

On December 6 1992, right-wing Hindu activists demolished Babur's Mosque in Ayodhya, which they claimed was built on top of Lord Ram's birthplace. In reprisal, Hindu temples in Pakistan were set ablaze. The growing Taliban presence in Pakistan has also worsened the religious divide, both within and between each country. India and Pakistan have engaged in numerous wars and skirmishes, which often see involvement from fundamentalist religious militias. Several terrorist attacks in India have also occurred, with Muslim Pakistani terrorists often the culprits.

Today, various Indian politicians openly embrace Hindu nationalism. The current prime minister, Narendra Modi, is infamous for his controversial role handling the 2002 Gujarat riots. Many have argued that as chief minister of the state, Modi allowed, and potentially abetted the riots—which primarily involved Hindu retribution against Muslims following a train fire that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya.

Additionally, religious violence has risen. Mass lynch mobs of purported "cow protectors" have been targeting Muslims selling beef, since the cow is sacred in Hinduism. Often, social media platforms, like Facebook, help coordinate these lynch mobs, due to lax controls on controlling hate speech. Facebook's definition of hate speech is so inconsistent and confusing; it is worth taking a New York Times quiz to experience the confusion; the relevant link is listed in the appendix section.

The Hindu-Muslim violence in India and Pakistan raises serious questions: how do we safeguard the religious sites of a minority when the ruling government appears increasingly hostile to that minority? How can we curb the influence of social media as a means to incite violence? Also, how do we resolve disputes regarding contested land between two different religious groups?
Buddhist-Muslim violence

Buddhist-Muslim violence is observable primarily in three countries: Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

In Myanmar, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people, a stateless Muslim minority in a majority-Buddhist state, has drawn widespread international condemnation. It has created a severe refugee crisis. Over 723,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh since August 25, 2017, overcrowding refugee camps.

In Thailand, a majority-Buddhist state, Malay Muslims in the South are waging a separatist insurgency, leading to violence between the two religious groups.

In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese Buddhist majority are mobilising against what it sees as an Islamic invasion of Sri Lanka. Following the Easter Sunday bombings, many Buddhists felt vindicated. Subsequent mob attacks on Muslims then forced the government to call a nationwide curfew.

Resurging anti-Semitism and growing Islamophobia in the West

Anti-Semitism seems to have pervaded through almost all societies. Most infamously, Jews were systemically persecuted by Nazis during the Holocaust. It is, therefore, worrying that dark portents of this prejudice have retaken root where the Holocaust occurred: Europe.

According to a December 2018 survey by the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency, 89% of Jews living in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK feel anti-Semitism has increased in their country over the past decade. This result accords with various events across Europe, such as the United Kingdom’s investigation into anti-Semitism within the Labour Party, the warning to Jews against wearing the kippah from Germany's anti-Semitism commissioner and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán peddling anti-Semitism with relative impunity. The rise of this prejudicial sentiment has also threatened the safety of Jewish religious sites—for example, a Jewish cemetery was vandalised in Bordeaux, France, on May 24, 2018.

Similarly, anti-Semitism is one of the defining tropes of the White Supremacist movement in the USA. Such sentiments were manifested in 2017 by the Charlottesville Riots, during which white supremacists chanted "Jews will not replace us." Again, anti-Semitism in the USA also threatens the safety of Jewish religious sites, as seen when a gunman opened fire in a synagogue in Pittsburgh last year.
Islamophobia is also nothing new in the Western world, fuelled mainly as a reaction against terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists and an increasing antipathy towards immigrants in general.

Member nations must address both prejudices in order to safeguard religious sites adequately.

Addressing radicalisation and extremism

Radical, extremist views often make it easier for people to commit and incite religious violence, and as such, addressing it has become a focal point of the United Nations. To address this issue, former Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon released a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. Delegates may wish to use some ideas from the Plan mentioned above and apply it more relevantly and correctly to the issue of safeguarding religious sites.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United Nations Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC)

Established in 2005, the UNAOC is a platform for international dialogue, to promote understanding and cooperation between different cultures and reduce the effects of polarisation. The UNAOC works in four main areas: youth, media, education and migration, and is also involved in the fight against hate speech and violent extremism. It also serves as a platform for interreligious dialogue.

On March 22, 2019, Secretary-General António Guterres tasked the UNAOC’s high representative to create a global plan of action to safeguard religious sites.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

UNESCO was founded on the premise to achieve peace through international cooperation in education, the sciences and culture, as political and economic arrangements by governments were not always effective in preventing war.

UNESCO is involved in a wide range of areas, from being a beacon advocating press freedom to a coordinator of disaster relief warning systems. Most relevantly, UNESCO protects landmarks through its UNESCO World Heritage Sites programme, some of which include religious sites.

The United States of America

Predominantly Christian, the US is home to at least 4 of the other major world religions. Being a major global player, the US is likely to champion its secular democracy model, in particular, the freedoms of religion and expression. Although that notion might be challenged by President Trump's travel ban and what many perceive as his Islamophobic policies and rhetoric, institutions in the US are required by law to ensure the full freedom of people practising religion.
At the same time, religious minorities, like Jews and Muslims, may face discrimination. The subject of protecting religious sites in the US is also made more difficult by civilian accessibility to firearms; shootings, and those at religious sites are thus not uncommon.

Therefore, the US is likely to get very involved in this matter. However, for the last twenty years, a general scepticism towards Islam and Muslim governments has characterised US foreign policy. So, expect the US to work with its usual allies, and exclude other Muslim governments.

**Saudi Arabia**

Home to two of the holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia is one of the most influential countries in the Muslim World. The Kingdom is a Sunni-majority state and uses the conservative Islamic Doctrine Wahhabism to govern, placing many restrictions on everyday life.

This style of government contrasts directly with the USA and its freedoms. Although both countries retain allied interests in other facets, the ideological difference is likely to play out with the USA supporting secularism as a means to reduce religious violence and Saudi Arabia insisting on an exception for predominantly Muslim countries.

**Iran**

Iran is the world's largest Shia-majority country. As previously mentioned, its geographical position and different views on government have put Iran at odds with Saudi Arabia, exacerbating the Sunni-Shia rift through a series of proxy wars.

However, being headed by a cleric, Iran would recognise the need to protect religious sites, although its stance in particular towards religious sites in Israel may be more controversial.

**India**

India proudly proclaims itself the world’s largest democracy, but Hindu-Muslim violence has increasingly threatened that, and Hindu nationalism has allowed lynch mobs hunting for “cow killers” to escape with relative impunity. India also has been suffering from rampant hate speech and fake news on social media.

The current Indian government’s attitude to all of this is ambivalent: while it is keen to preserve the many religious sites and join in to help other member nations, Prime Minister Modi has occasionally dabbled with Hindu nationalist rhetoric. So, expect some focus on Islam, especially towards Muslim terrorists.
Myanmar

Myanmar has received global condemnation for the treatment of the Rohingya people in Rakhine state. The government has justified its actions by claiming the Rohingya are illegal immigrants and also a potential terrorist threat.

Being a Buddhist-majority state, Myanmar represents other Buddhist-majority states which have felt increasing invaded by a Muslim minority.

Facebook

The Social Network has come under attack for being a platform to disseminate hate speech and incite violence. In response, Facebook has begun removing misinformation and has tried to combat the issue with a transparent advertisement library, so that ordinary users can see who were putting the ads up and how much they were paying to do it. However, experts have found many bugs and have shown the ad tool to be quite ineffective. Delegates may consider ways to regulate Facebook better.

Timeline of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 19, 1966</td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 16, 1972</td>
<td>Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted. It establishes the World Heritage Committee, which is responsible for the UNESCO World Heritage list.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 3, 1980</td>
<td>Anti-Semitic bombing of Paris synagogue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 25, 1981</td>
<td>Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief is adopted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 6, 1992</td>
<td>Right-wing Hindus destroy Babur’s Mosque in Ayodhya, leading to retaliatory attacks on Hindu temples in Pakistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Search For Common Ground, along with other NGOs, release a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites.</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 24, 2013</td>
<td>First reports of destruction on Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, Syria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 15, 2014</td>
<td>Security Council Resolution 2170 condemns destruction of cultural and religious sites by Islamic State.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-present</td>
<td>Rohingya migration crisis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
April 9, 2017  Palm Sunday bombings of churches in Egypt.
July 14, 2017  Action Plan for Religious Leaders, Actors on Preventing Incitement to Violence launched by Secretary-General Guterres.
May 24, 2018  Vandalism of Jewish cemetery in Bordeaux, France.
October 27, 2018  Shooting of synagogue in Pittsburgh, USA.
March 15, 2019  Christchurch shootings.
March 22, 2019  UN Secretary-General tasks the UNAOC’s High Representative to create a plan of action to safeguard religious sites.
April 21, 2019  Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka.

**Relevant UN Treaties and Events**

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948 ([A/RES/217(III) A](#))
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, December 19, 1966 ([A/RES/2200(XXI)A-C](#))
- Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, November 16, 1972
- Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, November 25, 1981 ([A/RES/36/55](#))
- Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, July 14, 2017

**Previous Attempts to solve the Issue**

**UN Involvement**

Seminal UN treaties like the Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, established strict and unequivocal definitions for people’s rights. In theory, this would allow crimes that violated these treaties to be tried justly under the rule of law. However, nationalised hate and prejudice of minority religious groups have prevailed in many member nations, rendering the destruction of religious sites inevitable. Although the UN has organisations to ensure the implementation of these treaties, offenders have escaped with impunity. The UN has a lack of control over the domestic situation in a state party.
Other resolutions or documents have other interesting initiatives. The 1954 Hague Convention, for example, calls for the establishment of select military units to be responsible for the protection of cultural property. The results of this initiative have been mixed: respected by some state parties, ignored by others during times of war. The threat of sanctions as punishment for breaching the Convention seems to have deterred few state parties from targeting heritage sites.

The more effective UN proposals are those where the UN has a greater ability to control the situation. The Rome Statute, which effectively helped found the International Criminal Court, defines intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion as a war crime. Therefore, offenders can be held accountable. As of today, only one person has been convicted of such a crime: Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi—and his case will be re-enacted at this year’s conference.

Revisions to the Hague Convention created a new concept called “Enhanced Protection”. This term means that the cultural property cannot be military targets; previously, the 1954 Hague Convention allowed attacks on a property out of military necessity. The only instance that the enhanced protection property can be targeted is if it is misused. However, as proper use of the cultural property (i.e. not for military purposes) is one of the stipulations for a cultural site to receive Enhanced Protection status, this makes it more difficult for cultural and religious sites to be targets. Currently, only 13 cultural properties are enjoying this status.

UNESCO’s involvement in protecting its world heritage sites have been successful. Sites which are listed “in danger” receive immediate assistance from the World Heritage Fund.

The UN has also conducted awareness-raising initiatives like proclaiming the 22 of August the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

### Security measures

Some religious sites have on-site security for protection and require visitors to undergo security checks before entering. However, not every member nation can afford to install security at each of its religious sites. Thus, the general direction towards security has been prevention—i.e. intelligence sharing—rather than protection.

Major inter-governmental organisations like the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other intelligence-sharing agreements between other states allow for the dissemination of vital information relating to counter-terrorism and other areas. However, preventative measures have not always been successful, best exemplified by the Sri Lankan Easter Sunday bombings whereby authorities failed to act accordingly despite receiving warnings days earlier.
NGO activity

In 2011, Search for Common Ground, along with other notable NGOs like The Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, launched a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. The code itself has several suggestions worth mentioning: establishing protective zones around religious sites, thereby prohibiting desecration; giving religious members sole authority of regulating access to a religious site, and ensuring that religious leaders are still involved after expropriation. There are also cogent ideas regarding implementation and monitoring. Measures to address more contentious issues in the code, however, like land disputes between opposing religions or questions regarding historical ownership and legitimacy, are severely undermined by the difficulty of resolving such issues.

Despite this, interfaith networks, religious communities and leaders worldwide have endorsed the code. There are also efforts to develop a UN resolution based on the code; Bosnia and Herzegovina is leading the efforts after a successful two-year pilot, with Indonesia and Norway supporting it.

There are other notable NGOs involved in the protection of religious sites. Blue Shield International, often called the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross, coordinate emergency responses to cultural and religious sites that may be affected by adverse weather or other conditions. Blue Shield’s approach is mainly proactive, and it works to train people to observe the Hague Convention, particularly in teaching them how to locate and avoid cultural sites during war.

Possible Solutions

It is an understatement to say that adopting the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites as a resolution itself would be more than sufficient. There are, however, other possible solutions.

Encouraging more countries to sign and ratify the Hague Convention, and recommending member states to take further legal action recognising religious sites as emblems of world heritage would mean that more religious sites could be designated “Enhanced Protection”. This would give more robust protection to these sites, particularly in times of war.

Although religious leaders play a significant part in healing torn communities, more attempts should be made to defrock and disregard those who advocate for violence.

Delegates must define the term “hate speech” universally to help government agencies prosecute. The definition should accord with Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Once this is defined, member states should adopt legislation prohibiting hate speech. Caution: authoritarian governments can easily abuse this in the ostensible name of justice.
Better education can reduce underlying tensions by providing people with alternative perspectives and make them less susceptible to disinformation, fake news and hate speech. Delegates may wish to continue implementing new awareness programmes or modify prejudicial educational curriculums, with the cooperation of UNESCO.

Social media needs increased regulation to remove inciting content, ideally with government and judicial oversight. Efforts must be made in these committees to ensure there is a balance of political opinions and perspectives. Again, this can be easily abused by authoritarian governments so delegates can consider alternatives.

Finally, member states must make more efforts to condemn nationwide, government-abetted discrimination in other countries, to reduce the threat to religious sites.

Bibliography


“Who We Are.” United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/.


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Appendix or Appendices

I. Shia and Sunni Islam
   https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia_1.shtml and
II. Quiz on Facebook Hate Speech rules