

Faith Communities as Diplomatic Multipliers: International Institutions Establish Cooperation with Religions More Systematically

- Religions for Peace and Alliance of Civilizations reaffirm deeper cooperation
- Coalition agreement of the German government clarifies significance of religion in foreign policy matters

NEW YORK – Religions play a role in many conflicts around the world. As a rule, however, they do not act as triggers, but as social catalysts: they can either exacerbate conflicts - or resolve them. This immense influence of religious communities is to be made more useful diplomatically. Internationally active institutions agreed on closer cooperation at a hybrid meeting in early December.

The meeting was organized by the New York-based UN initiative *Alliance of Civilizations** together with the NGO *Religions for Peace*, also based in New York.

The importance and necessity of systematic cooperation with representatives of faith communities for diplomatic solutions was emphasized by three high-ranking UN representatives at the meeting: **Pramila Patten**, the *United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict*; **Gillian Triggs**, representative of the *UN High Commissioner for Refugees*; and **Alice Wairimu Nderitu**, the *United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide*. They all reiterated their support for deeper cooperation between the Alliance of Civilizations and Religions for Peace.

German foreign policy attaches great importance to interreligious initiatives. This was emphasized by Prof. **Wolfgang Schürer**, Chairman of the Board of the Lindau Foundation for Peace Dialogue of World Religions and Civil Society. "Regardless of how closely people feel connected to their faith communities, the ethical reservoir of all world religions is a crucial compass for the development of world affairs." For this reason, he said, it is to be commended that the German federal government and, in

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particular, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier have launched various corresponding initiatives in recent years.

Irmgard Fellner, *Deputy Director of the Department of Culture and Communication at the Federal Foreign Office*, also highlighted the diplomatic potential in cooperation with religious representatives. All those responsible in the "Religion and Foreign Policy" department are very proud that international and interreligious cooperation is even written into the coalition agreement of the new federal government**. "It is wonderful to work with you," said Irmgard Fellner, addressing **Azza Karam**, the *Secretary General of Religions for Peace*, and emphasized that her department would continue to work to ensure that Lindau remained a place of interreligious dialogue. Lindau has hosted the past three *Religions for Peace* conferences, organized by the *Foundation Peace Dialogue of World Religions and Civil Society*.

The hybrid meeting evaluated these three conferences in Lindau in order to better exploit the diplomatic opportunities of international cooperation in the future. To realize the further potential, **Miguel Ángel Moratinos**, High Representative of the Alliance of Civilizations of the United Nations, proposed to continue the discussion with more time at the next meeting in Lindau.

* The Alliance of Civilizations (UNAoC) is a UN initiative founded in 2004 by Spain and Turkey under UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. It aims to develop approaches to overcome cultural, religious and social barriers between societies and to combat extremism.

** The coalition agreement of the newly elected federal government states on page 126 under the heading "Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy": "We are strengthening relations between cities and expanding urban diplomacy, strengthening programs in European border regions as well as international sports policy and the area of religion and foreign policy."

*** Religions for Peace is an NGO accredited by the UN in a consultative capacity with the purpose of bringing together representatives of all religions in order to exchange ideas and to initiate joint, cross-faith projects. Religions for Peace has a worldwide network of 92 national, so-called multi-religious councils, each of which includes representatives of different faiths.