



# Informal Dialogue Meetings with Religious Leaders to Contribute to Freedom of Religion and Belief

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# Acknowledgments

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# Disclaimer

While the team made all efforts possible to cross-check information and reproduce only accurate facts and events, this does not overrule the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which ALEF expresses hereby its regrets.

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# Introduction

Based on the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation - Lebanon (DLR) and ALEF - Act for Human Rights in June 2022, DLR launched a series of informal dialogue meetings that would engage religious leaders in contributing to freedom of religion and belief, between June and August 2022, among members of the Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon, an interreligious network founded by DLR in 2016 to connect and bring together Sunni Muslim, Alawite Muslim, Maronite Christian, and Orthodox Christian religious leaders, in addition to representatives from other religious denominations in the region.

DLR divided the network into four subgroups, with eight to 12 people in each group. Each subgroup was provided with the space to meet, a facilitator, and a note taker to launch the debate, facilitate the discussion, and take stock of all the relevant information related to the topic that was being studied. In June 2022, the Scientific Committee of the Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon, agreed on a common strategy to address the four expected outcomes of the series of informal dialogue meetings:

## Outcome 1

Religious authorities of diverse backgrounds exchange their opinions on topics of freedom of religion and belief.

## Outcome 2

The impact of the multiple crises on the different communities and social cohesion is addressed by participants in the meetings.

## Outcome 3

Religious authorities of different backgrounds are given the space to express the challenges faced and the recommendations they have and identify roles they can play in social mitigation.

## Outcome 4

ALEF and DLR have relevant recommendations to advocate with donors, UN agencies, and governments on ways to address religiously-driven social tensions.

Four meetings in total were conducted with 51 religious leaders divided into four different groups during every meeting. Each meeting dealt with a topic relevant to the broader theme of the project. The first meeting took place on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022 in which participants exchanged opinions on the theme of **freedom of religion and belief** in general. The second meeting took place on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022 and focused on common reflections on the **impact of the multiple crises on the different religious communities and social cohesion**. On July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the third meeting pushed all four subgroups to think on **the challenges faced and how they can be mitigated**. The last meeting took place on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022 and focused on providing ALEF and DLR with relevant recommendations to advocate with donors, UN agencies, and governments on ways to address religiously-driven social tensions.

In parallel, DLR also launched a survey among the participants to collect further data on their perception of the topics of the meetings. The questionnaire was then analyzed by the organization to feed into the understanding of the outcomes of every meeting.

# Findings

Generally speaking, there was consensus among the Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon that freedom of belief and religion exists in Lebanon, with 86.2% of respondents to DLR's survey agreeing with that statement and 93.1% considering that the government recognizes religious institutions and protects religious sites. The former is further confirmed with 89.7% considering that freedom to practice is also protected and interfaith communication exists (96.6%). What was interesting is that there's less confidence in freedom of leaving or breaking free from religious groups, with only 44.8% agreeing to that question. Below is the detailed breakdown of the most relevant survey results:

Assumption	Percentage of Agreement
Freedom of belief and religion is existing	86.2%
Freedom to leave/break free from religious commitments	44.8%
Freedom of Practice of religious rites	89.7%
Interfaith communication is existing	96.6%
Sharing and announcing faith is accepted	48.2%
Building well protected religious sites	86.2%
Choosing religious leaders is existing	75.9%
Religion education is existing	82.8%
Government recognizes religious institutions	93.1%
Government accepting of religious institutions decrees and decisions	65.5%

## Topic of Freedom of Religion and Belief

In all four different subgroups with which informal dialogue meetings were conducted, all participants expressed in consensus the crucial importance of preserving the freedom of individuals to choose what to believe in and whether to commit to a religion or not – with an emphasis on the respect of boundaries and other people's choices. Another common point was identified in their agreement on the idea that, while the two concepts are interconnected to a certain extent and cannot be really taken as completely separate things, the terms of religion

and belief stand for different meanings. A third common factor reflected in all discussions is that the levels of commitment and faith of members of a same religion vary according to the levels of knowledge, personal experience, and forms of interpretation. The difference in socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic location were also factors that were considered as influential on the different perceptions of religious concepts and beliefs.

## **Impact of the Multiple Crises on the Different Communities and Social Cohesion in the North**

The conversation under the abovementioned theme was framed within two major questions:

- Is there a correlation between the level of individual freedom and social crises?
- Does separating religion from the state contribute to activating social solidarity and alleviating social crises better than following religions?

Across all subgroups, answers for the **first question** were diversified. The most recurring answers were varying between a first opinion that focuses on the absence of any link or correlation between personal freedom and social crises; knowing that individuals are not responsible for such big scale issues but rather the government; and a second opinion that gives a level of importance to the impact that personal freedom can have on creating more self-accepting communities which would indirectly contribute to the reduction of crises risks. Less recurrent but also important highlights were the mention that the absence of faith and ignorance about and misinterpretation of religious beliefs lead to the creation of selfish communities that are more prone to fall into crises and social instability. Some also expressed the idea that the entanglement of politics in religion and the instrumentalization of religion by leaders and politicians exacerbate challenges – the elections were given as an example.

Opinions to the **second question** were varying between two opposing arguments: one that supports the separation of religion from the state and another against. Several participants across subgroups agreed that in light of the use of religion by politics to enable certain dynamics within their context and to limit personal freedom, religion should be separated from the state and be perceived as an element of personal values and freedom rather than an influence on public affairs. However, another group of participants disagreed by considering that the religious element enables a spirit of unity, thus reducing conflicts and preserving cohesion and societal values such as family values in the country. Additionally, it was also perceived that religion is an integral part of the Lebanese political sphere and cannot be simply removed.

## **Challenges to Freedom of Religion and Belief and Measures to mitigate such Challenges**

Various challenges were identified and were re-affirmed across all subgroups, mainly as follows:

- Political discourse used in different communities and areas that instrumentalizes religion and makes use of religion to manipulate communities and influence public opinion

- Complete rejection of religion by certain factions of society due to their perception that religion is the source of problems in Lebanon
- General crisis of values and morals that is causing divisions within society and a rejection of the “different other”
- External political factors and the current unsettled regional and international contexts, such as armed conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic
- Misunderstanding or lack of effort to understand the difference in opinions and the diversity of beliefs that exist within the same community or across communities and areas

To mitigate the abovementioned challenges, the following mitigation measures were suggested by the participants:

- Conducting interfaith gatherings and sessions targeting different factions of society to raise awareness on freedom of religion and belief
- Student exchange and collective engagement in awareness and capacity building activities to strengthen interfaith and intercommunity communication and exchange of ideas
- Enabling public spaces for the organisation of cultural events that bring different communities together
- Conducting campaigns, dialogues, and awareness-raising virtual activities through online fora and social media platforms

## **Suggested Activities**

During the last round of meetings, the different subgroups were also requested to draw from their previous conversations recommendations and suggested initiatives to strengthen dialogue and exchange on freedom of religion and belief. The types of the suggested activities varied between dialogue, awareness-raising, and exchange, as follows:

- “Pilgrimage towards the other” through university exchange activities: This activity would allow room to get to know the other more and to raise concerns, problems, and questions that hinder religious freedom and respond to them.
- Producing a people-centric documentary and showcasing it in a townhall meeting: Organizing a meeting in a village hall or church, showing a documentary film that raises the concerns of the population in general, and then launching a Q&A session between attendees and religious and clergy representatives of different denominations.
- Organizing friendly sports games: An expanded and media-covered football match with the participation of clerics and public sports figures.

- Targeting various youth groups (young women and men in high schools and universities) of all religious groups present today, from the city of Tripoli and its surroundings, as part of various targeted socio-cultural activities.
- A general meeting of the clergy in Tripoli and its surroundings: Organizing cultural meetings focusing on the different religious groups in Tripoli in order for every group to learn about other religious groups directly from them, enhancing coexistence and the richness of religious diversity.
- Holding a mobile interfaith conference and/or cultural seminar in the districts of the North governorate, in which clerics from the region's religious groups speak about freedom of belief, religious diversity, and coexistence.
- Establishing a social club to direct and educate the community, so that followers of different religions join efforts to organize certain events: The club would create a space of openness towards the other, educate youth, and organize social, cultural, educational and environmental activities and meetings without addressing religious issues.

# Activity Success Stories and Lessons Learnt

- Despite the difficulties associated with addressing the topic of freedom of religion and belief by religious leaders in the North of Lebanon, trust and cooperation made the DLR's mission easier and allowed the organization to explore this sensitive topic with religious leaders in order to complete these informal dialogue meetings within the set timeframe
- DLR initially anticipated a maximum of 30 participants in the informal dialogue meetings. However, due to the efforts of the Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon and the planning and active involvement of the network's Scientific Committee, DLR was able to bring together a group of 40 to 52 participants who displayed a great deal of motivation and enthusiasm in sharing their experiences.
- Participants appreciated the financial support that was provided (transportation fees were covered and take-home snack boxes were offered during coffee breaks). In that way, the financial conditions of the communities in that area were taken into account and respected.
- Being able to hold the meetings of the different groups on the same day, welcoming them all together, and sharing the main findings across the network, was a great eye-opener to widen the perspectives of each group. This also allowed a deep interaction during coffee breaks during which network members had the chance to discuss points of interest and spend quality time together.
- DLR purposefully did not post its work on social media. Rather than doing so after the activity was completed, DLR and participants agreed to preserve the confidentiality of the activity in order to launch a discussion as open as possible and build a solid foundation among participants.

# DLR Recommendations and Observations

- The Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon is ready to launch activities to promote freedom of religion and belief in the North. Working together and sharing their experiences gave them the trust they needed within their own communities, as well as the opportunity to reach out to each other's religious communities.
- Given the importance and sensitivity of this topic, DLR believes that the network, gathered and connected through the organization, is the only network of religious leaders capable of launching a series of freedom of religion and belief projects in the North of Lebanon, where no other network will have the same influence, facilities, and support.
- From the findings of the informal dialogue meetings, the most relevant ideas are those that can reach out to both the Muslim and Christian communities. As such, participants recommended conducting a brief training on freedom of religion and belief in various villages, during which religious leaders will be present to welcome one another and share knowledge on the topic. By doing so, a large number of beneficiaries can be reached and different communities will have the opportunity to interact.

