

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
R O U N D T A B L E

Multi-Faith

**International Religious Freedom (IRF)
Roundtable**

Establishment Checklist

Working Draft

March 18, 2019

KEYS TO IRF ROUNDTABLE SUCCESS

Establishment Checklist

IRF Roundtables offer simple and elegant ways to bring people together—despite deep theological and political differences—and build mutual understanding, respect, trust and reliance among groups, citizens and governments. They have proven to be effective at building consensus-based coalitions that drive multi-faith engagement actions that impact public policy to advance religious freedom for everyone, everywhere. However, they require important parameters, structures and dispositions to be effective.

Advance Preparations

Strategic preparations are key to the effective replication and deployment of the multi-faith IRF Roundtable model in a country or region. Specific actions that have proven successful in establishing a Roundtable include:

- Identify and select a strong in-country partner to serve as lead organization or individual and convener, facilitator, coordinator.**

Lead partners on the ground need access to networks of diverse organizations and individuals that are broadly seen and accepted as credible and representative by multiple sectors of the diversity required. Further, they need the ability to bring people together, facilitate and coordinate multi-faith actions. The in-country partners should see this as an opportunity to engage with others and outside decision-makers in ways they can hear and understand.

- Identify and select a strong U.S.-based partner and IRF Roundtable participant to serve as supporting organization or individual and**

liaison.

Having supporting U.S.-based partners that participate in the IRF Roundtable in Washington is important since they understand the multi-faith model and how it works, and can serve as mentors to the in-country partners. The U.S.-based partners should see this not primarily as a development opportunity, or a chance to impose their understanding on the country or region, but an opportunity for collaboration and coordination that increases our impact on public policy worldwide. In fact, it helps if the U.S.-based partners have traveled to, worked in and understand the countries/regions and local contexts in which the new Roundtables are being established.

- ❑ **If possible, pair in-country and U.S.-based partners that have clearly established relationships.**

It will help if the lead in-country partners and the supporting U.S.-based partners have relationships that are built upon previous and/or ongoing collaborations that support high levels of mutual trust and reliance.

- ❑ **Have the U.S.-based partners educate the in-country partners about the model and invite them to attend and participate in an IRF Roundtable meeting in Washington.**

As participants of the IRF Roundtable and champions of the model that understand its unique potential, opportunities and challenges, the U.S.-based partners should educate and enlighten the in-country partners. And it really helps for the in-country partners to see the IRF Roundtable in action; to attend and participate in at least one Roundtable meeting in person. We have been told by multiple first-time participants from other countries that they thought they understood the model when it was explained to them, but they had no idea until they saw it with their own eyes. In the case of the multi-faith IRF Roundtable, seeing is vital to believing and understanding

its unique, special and powerful nature. It gives the in-country partners a strong demonstration of the multi-faith model and the true potential of cross-cultural engagement on issues consistent with the diverse views of local actors rather than just Western frames driven by policy or funding priorities.

- ❑ **Make significant good-faith efforts to build and expand the invite list to include representation from all faiths—majority and minority—and secular communities.**

Diversity and inclusion are keys to the success of the multi-faith IRF Roundtable model. In-country partners should make good-faith efforts to push invitations beyond their own networks, standard circles and the “usual suspects.” They should identify and include communities that have never had a seat at the table and have therefore been left out of policy conversations that impact faith communities and freedom of religion or belief issues. These will often include people and organizations from persecuted communities and minority faiths that are viewed as “non-traditional.” An important resource for identifying communities that face persecution is the annual U.S. State Department IRF Report ([current report available here](#)). Partners from majority communities that are committed to religious freedom for everyone should also be included in these multi-faith conversations.

- ❑ **Invite and secure the support and participation of the leaders of the IRF Roundtable in Washington.**

Interfacing through the global network of civil society-led IRF Roundtables is vital to success and securing the support of the IRF Roundtable in Washington is important since it is the hub of the network and a key leader on IRF/FoRB issues.

- ❑ **Invite and secure the support and participation of recognized and**

respected government authorities and IRF/FoRB leaders.

Connecting the top-down of governments with the bottom-up of civil society is a key to the success of the IRF Roundtable model. As much as possible, in-country partners should invite and secure the support and participation of leaders and representatives of their own governments and legislatures—especially if the governments have IRF Ambassadors or Special Envoys—or at least individual IRF/FoRB champions and supporters in them. Further, inviting and securing the support and participation of recognized and respected IRF/FoRB leaders (e.g. U.S. IRF Ambassador Sam Brownback and the State Department IRF Office, the U.S. Embassy in the country, IRF Ambassadors and Special Envoys from other countries, the UN Special Rapporteur for FoRB, etc.) are important for recruiting in-country organizations and individuals who are highly marginalized and may not trust the launch event without such respected outside IRF/FoRB authorities validating it. In fact, these IRF/FoRB leaders should be consulted and asked for additional organizations and individuals to invite to the launch event. Note, this does not mean these authorities will formally endorse any outcomes, but simply validate that the Roundtable being established is consistent with the type of model that these IRF authorities know can drive and advance respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and thereby increase stability, security, peace and prosperity.

□ Consider two important insights and suggestions when finalizing and preparing the invite list for the Launch Event.

First, in the early stages of establishment, in-country partners should consider limiting the early access and/or participation of organizations that receive significant funding from foreign entities. Such organizations are perceived to have grant-making resources, and if they are conveners, leaders or drivers of multi-faith actions,

this could change the way other participants engage as they could become less frank and adapt their participation to align with the priorities of the perceived grant-makers in hopes of securing funding in the future. As new patterns of candid conversations, mutual respect and trust, and multi-faith actions are being established, it is important to allow organizations and individuals that do not have a significant grant-making function to be the leaders, facilitators and coordinators of multi-faith actions. Once the IRF Roundtable matures and its patterns are set, this becomes less of a concern.

Second, in-country partners should likewise consider limiting the early access and/or participation of highly-prominent figures. Such organizations and individuals that have high levels of power, influence and/or social capital—especially those of the majority faiths—can create division if they attempt to utilize such to dictate, control and focus the IRF Roundtable to advance their own narrow interests. It is important that the conveners and leaders of the IRF Roundtable include organizations and individuals who do important work and are recognized and respected as credible but do not necessarily have vast constituencies or important positions of power. This will ensure that minority and marginalized voices are elevated to equal citizenship status through the power of a diverse and unified coalition. Again, once the IRF Roundtable matures and its patterns are set, this becomes less of a concern.

□ Share the IRF Roundtable foundational documents to socialize the concept and increase understanding.

In-country partners should share the *IRF Roundtable Overview & Purpose Statement* along with the *Multi-Faith Roundtable “Keys to Success”* document and the *IRF Secretariat Summary* with everyone on the invite list in multiple interactions to build agreement and support. Further, in-country partners should also consider sharing

the public remarks of U.S. IRF Ambassador Sam Brownback related to the annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the regional religious freedom conferences that are being organized in various countries and regions, and the global network of IRF Roundtables they are joining. And they should regularly refer back to these documents and remarks as important reference points to ensure participants stay focused on the purpose of the global network of IRF Roundtables and the outcomes we all seek—religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

❑ **Clearly establish the financial expectations of all participants—there will be no compensation for their participation.**

It is important in many countries and regions to let participants know from the outset that they will be required to cover the costs of their own participation in the IRF Roundtable (i.e., there will be no compensation given for travel, lodging, or per diem). This is their investment in the event and will disincentivize participants who are only seeking status or glamour. It should be noted that this risks the exclusion of those from extremely poor communities. However, existing IRF Roundtables have demonstrated that even highly-marginalized communities find ways to participate. It may be possible that the very poor could be sponsored by one or more participating organizations or individuals, which should be encouraged where applicable.

❑ **In customizing the IRF Roundtable for the local context, use clear language that is consistent and aligned with the IRF Roundtable model and foundational documents.**

During planning, organizing and articulating the establishment of IRF Roundtables in new countries or regions, in-country partners should ensure the language they use represents an intersection of the IRF Roundtable model and the culture of the country or region. This can

include ways of shaping freedom of religion, belief, and conscience for all with diversity, equity, and inclusion in language that is relevant to local cultures. This may include such language as justice, rule-of-law, peace, hospitality, neighborliness or more.

- ❑ **In preparation for the Launch Event, customize the *IRF Roundtable Overview & Purpose Statement* for the local context, draft an initial organizing and action plan, and consider drafting an initial multi-faith statement to propose.**

Having drafts of the foundational documents and a first multi-faith action ready to propose and shape at the Launch Event enables in-country partners to engage and invite the active participation of the founding participants right from the start.

Launch Event

The Launch Event should serve as the organizing meeting of a new IRF Roundtable in a country or region. Since tensions can arise among people who have been persecuted and harmed or are simply living under government restrictions and/or social hostilities and have grievances, effective management of participant expectations and the processes of convening, facilitating and coordinating is essential to effectiveness. The following have been found by experience to be important:

- ❑ **Schedule and organize the first meeting in coordination with the leaders of the IRF Roundtable in Washington, recognized and respected government authorities in the country or region, and IRF/FoRB leaders that include the U.S. State Department IRF Office.**

In-country partners, in coordination with the U.S.-based partners, should invite and work with the leaders of the IRF Roundtable in Washington, recognized and respected government authorities in the country, if possible, and the U.S. State Department IRF Office and

any other IRF/FoRB leaders in the country or region to find a date that works for everyone. Schedule this first meeting on a date and time and in a safe and appropriate location that ensures maximum participation from these key players. Having them in the room is important as it elevates the new IRF Roundtable, sends a clear signal to all participants they are joining a growing global network that is a high priority of IRF/FoRB leaders, and tends to ensure everyone is respectful at the Roundtable and in the discussions.

Plan sufficient time for your launch event.

The organizing meeting may require 4-8 hours to accomplish the goals and purposes. Especially if the in-country partners choose to go through and shape the language of the foundational documents, the initial organizing and action plan, and the first multi-faith statement with all participants.

Choose appropriate room setup and catering.

The setup of the room should be a hollow square of tables with chairs on the outside facing into the middle so everyone can see and speak to each other. If needed, extra chairs can be set around the hollow square and/or along the perimeter of the room. Ideally, there will be a microphone on each table in the hollow square but handheld mics work, as well, if someone is available to walk around the room and hand them to whoever wants to speak. Coffee, tea and water is usually available for the entire meeting. And if the organizing meetings run more than 4 hours, lunch or meal breaks will likely be needed.

Send out the invites with draft foundational documents and build the RSVP list.

In-country partners should share the draft foundational documents and the first proposed multi-faith statement with all participants in

advance of the meeting. Invite them to prepare specific feedback to bring with them to the meeting so they can help to shape and finalize the language. Finally, in-country partners should share the RSVP list with U.S.-based partners, leaders of the IRF Roundtable in Washington, recognized and respected government authorities in the country, if they are supportive and agreed to participate, and the U.S. State Department IRF Office and any other IRF/FoRB leaders in the country or region who have agreed to participate.

❑ Open the meeting with the global overview and context.

In-country partners should open the meeting and welcome everyone. The U.S.-based partners could then speak and introduce the leader of the IRF Roundtable in Washington, who should deliver the story of the Roundtable, the vision of the global network of multi-faith roundtables and how it connects with the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and the regional religious freedom conferences and welcome the new IRF Roundtable into this network.

❑ Invoke the Chatham House Rule.

In-country partners should then invoke and explain the Chatham House Rule. The meeting is off the record and the discussion will be held on a non-attribution basis. Participants are free to use information from the discussion but are not allowed to quote anyone or reveal who made any specific comments. This is meant to be a safe space for open and honest discussion.

❑ Bear witness to the multi-faith model and its desired outcomes.

Describing the multi-faith IRF Roundtable model to participants at the meeting and reiterating it throughout the process is very important as it reminds participants that this is a safe place for them and should deliver value to their community. Demonstrating the value of what IRF Roundtables have delivered in other places is also

very helpful.

❑ **Consistently use clear, thematic, problem and solution-focused language.**

Begin by reminding people that what is needed is clear thematic language (e.g. focus on multi-faith, citizen-led action to advance religious freedom for all and ensure peace, justice, and the rule of law), and avoid focusing on religious or group identities and agendas. The purpose of this advocacy model is to empower participants to put specific problems (that are causing restrictions on religious communities and violations of individuals' rights and freedoms based on identities, beliefs or practices) on the table and propose solutions in the form of government and multi-faith initiatives. Leading with these problems help diverse groups to identify with one another and begin to shape joint, multi-faith actions, activities, and processes in ways that can be more effectively engage policy decision makers.

❑ **Give everyone at the table a chance to be heard.**

Go around the table and allow all participants 3-4 minutes to introduce themselves and share brief perspectives on such problems, their work and concerns they have about religious freedom in their country. Letting people speak and be heard is very important. This can take a long time, but if people are encouraged to be clear and concise and not necessarily take up their full allotment of time—so all participants can be heard—it helps to build fidelity and a sense of mutual trust. To this end, congratulate people for being brief, insist politely but firmly on keeping statements within allocated times and parameters, and do not allow statements to be read if they exceed allocated times.

❑ Formally organize the new IRF Roundtable and choose the core leadership team.

In-country partners should then announce the formation of the new IRF Roundtable and lead participants in the selection of the chair and/or co-chairs and the steering committee. Do this while everyone is present so that they know they can respond to these individuals and that the core activists have a body that can validate their efforts to the broader group.

❑ Shape the foundational documents and statements.

In-country partners should then walk all participants through the language of the foundational documents, the initial organizing and action plan, and the first multi-faith statement. Allow everyone to recommend edits and revisions. This will immediately and firmly establish several key principles: it will demonstrate that this is a multi-faith, inclusive, equal citizenship model in practice; it will run on a participant-led, action-oriented and opt-in basis; and it will give each participant a sense of ownership and value. This is what sets the IRF Roundtable apart. This is what will keep them coming back and spreading good word of mouth that will enable the IRF Roundtable to grow and increase our impact.

❑ Agree to meet again and prepare next steps.

The new IRF Roundtable leaders should survey all participants and reach agreement on the frequency of meetings. Quarterly meetings should be sufficient, but this is up to the leaders and participants. This decision will determine when the next meeting will be scheduled. Finally, collaboratively set up expectations for next steps with the participants, including communications method and point of contact, reasonable plans for the next meeting, suggestions of future actions, or other relevant possibilities.

