

# NEWS FROM THE FRONT

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## Religious Affairs: A Prospective in Horn of Africa Mission Planning

U.S. Armed Forces chaplaincies support various joint operations in order to accommodate religious needs, provide religious and pastoral care, and also advise commanders on the complexities of religion with regard to personnel and mission, as appropriate. Religious affairs in joint military operations play a vital role in supporting commanders throughout the operational area, in alignment with the commander's overall theater security program.<sup>1</sup> Religious affairs is not often used by commanders as a "first choice multiplier" during military engagements with our friends and allies; however, it can be effective in building relationships for the long term. This news from the front (NFTF) article discusses a program known as *Voices of Religious Tolerance* (VORT) which was employed in Afghanistan, Jordan, and Somalia, and provides a way to involve religious affairs to support countering extremist ideas. This NFTF should be useful to religious affairs teams attempting to use this program or build a similar one.

CAPT (USN) J. Victor Sheldon, Director of Religious Affairs, Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Africa, shared his thoughts on the potential of religious engagements in HOA. "The time is right to cast a new vision for religious affairs missions, aligned and synchronized with future CJTF-HOA mission sets. We can assist in building bridges to keep both military and civilian religious leaders engaged in Somalia and throughout the AOR, similar to what was accomplished with Jordanian and Afghan religious leaders through the Voices of Religious Tolerance program."

In 2011, the United States Department of State promoted religious freedom with the Jordanian government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues with Jordanian government authorities. Frequent meetings ensued between embassy officers and various religious and missionary Jordanian communities, as well as with private religious organizations and interfaith institutions.<sup>2</sup>

In April 2011, the U.S. Embassy organized the *VORT* program which was designed to counter extremist voices in Afghanistan. In 2012, a Religious Engagement Program seminar was hosted by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, Afghanistan, to promote religious tolerance and reintegration by encouraging key religious leaders to challenge insurgents'

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<sup>1</sup>Executive Summary, Basis of Religious Affairs, *Joint Publication 1-05, Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, 20 November 2013.

<sup>2</sup> International Religious Freedom Report for 2011, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2011religiousfreedom/#wrapper>, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193103.pdf>

narratives. One of the discussions during the Religious Engagement Program seminar focused on bringing Jordanian military chaplains to Afghanistan to interact with the local populace.<sup>3</sup>

The VORT program in Afghanistan consisted of three separate phases: shaping phase, the decisive phase, and an engagement phase. The shaping phase involved coordination and planning. The decisive phase — the visit to Jordan — included lectures, discussions, and trips to local sites and landmarks. The engagement phase took place upon the return to Helmand province (Afghanistan), and it provided VORT attendees a platform to interact with numerous Afghan communities. An initiative of this magnitude requires support from the sponsor staff early in the planning process in order to facilitate synchronization across all functional areas. Planning also requires coordinating with area key leaders to select suitable individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The results of the first VORT were positive. Jordanian Armed Forces, ISAF, and Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) built lasting relationships. Several battle space owners reported hearing the positive effects of the experiences shared by the attendees. The drop in violence in a particular district that sent 10 of the 30 April 2011 VORT participants was an indicator of the program's success. The 70-80 percent drop in violence from 2010 to 2011 in this district was partially attributed to VORT. Afghan key leaders' visit to another Islamic country increased their exposure to tolerant interpretations of Islam. Their individual experiences were passed along to others and resulted in a positive impact throughout their communities.<sup>5</sup>

It is imperative that CJTF-HOA and the Federal Government of Somalia continue to challenge insurgents' narratives with inspiring messages, such as "Somalia Rising" and "Why AMISOM<sup>6</sup> is here." A program such as VORT could provide a medium to inform and influence key clan leaders towards understanding a moderate interpretation of Islam and hopefully become more tolerant of other faiths. This type of messaging could inform the local population that AMISOM is here to provide assistance and is manned with multinational forces — including those of the Islamic faith.

According to Sheldon, U.S. chaplains should be part of the integrated team making initial contact with religious leaders in the AOR, especially where HOA leadership wants to build relationships and develop influence. "I think this is a key component and a missing element of our engagement schema. Relationships in the HOA AOR are crucial and they take time to build. It will require the most senior leadership to decide how religious affairs can support mission tasks, activities, and their corresponding effects."

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<sup>3</sup> Voices of Religious Tolerance, COMISAF Advisory and Assistance Team (CAAT), Report. March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> AMISOM: African Union Mission in Somalia; Troop/Police Contributing Countries.

“The future role and purpose of HOA religious affairs should always be clearly defined, and aligned with the commander’s intent to support opportunities such as stabilization in Somalia. Chaplains in support of religious engagements can significantly enhance the stabilization effort. It has been my experience that local religious leaders will generally trust a chaplain especially once they understand our unique role as noncombatants and as clergy who happen to be in uniform. Invariably, this is a different paradigm for local religious leaders. Once they begin to understand our role and to relate religious leader to religious leader, the commonalities we share become more apparent. This is also not about either of us denying or undermining our respective, religious doctrines or teachings. Frankly, we do differ, and my Muslim friends respect this, as I do. But, we also have a rich, shared history of working and living together which has been overshadowed by current events. I think there is untapped religious affairs potential in HOA,” said Sheldon.

Sheldon further explained, “As a Christian chaplain visiting my Muslim counterparts (throughout the world), often they will see and hear from an American Christian leader for the first time. Over the course of our visit, they typically begin to understand that America is not just a secular, or non-religious country, and that we are not all non-believers (as some wrongly assume or have been told). Through face-to-face discussion, they begin to understand that a large segment of the American population, like themselves, are people of the Book. This discussion may open their eyes, hearts, and their ideology towards religious tolerance.”

In February 2017, Commander (USN) Abuhena Saifulislam, Deputy Command Chaplain, U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM), visited Djibouti, Africa, as a participant in USAFRICOM’s Cutlass Express 2017 exercise. Saifulislam is one of two U.S. Navy Imam chaplains and one of 12 Islamic Imams in the entire U.S. military. “My being here shows those I meet how diverse a country America is,” he said.<sup>7</sup>

“We have people of all faiths in all positions, to include in the U.S. military. Our faith is a common element between the Islamic people of Djibouti and myself. People tend to connect more through their faith than anything else. Regardless of who we are, or where we come from, our faith remains the same,” Saifulislam said.<sup>8</sup>

Sheldon continued, “A second thing that is eye opening for Muslim religious leaders is when they see Chaplain Saifulislam and me side-by-side, of different faiths, working together for a common good — that is a powerful symbol of hope. Similarly, chaplains can be an instrument of dialog with Somali Imams to encourage them in their own efforts to give voice to the call to be faithful Muslims within their religious tradition, and void of al-Shabaab ideological influence.”

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<sup>7</sup> MSgt. Paul Gorman. “Keeping the Faith”, CJTF-HOA PAO. 14 Feb. 2017, <https://www.hoa.africom.mil/story/20580/keeping-the-faith>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

According to Sheldon, one additional way to counter, or at least mitigate al-Shabaab's ideology, is to offer a valid and reasonable alternative that is legitimate and comes from within their own faith tradition. Preferably one that does not include the violence such as that propagated by al-Shabaab.

As Sheldon approaches the end of his one-year deployment in HOA, his focus is on shaping CJTF-HOA's future mission plan towards a vision of religious affairs support in Somalia. Aligning religious affairs to mission planning is a key component, producing an untapped and often unrealized potential towards a more peaceful, stable, and prosperous Somalia. He hopes that the achievements of the HOA Religious Affairs Team and the good work of his predecessors is a concrete witness to both military and civilian leaders that "religion can be part of the solution, not just dismissed as the problem."

"One of my mentors and colleagues, a former Marine Corps officer, often reminds me that 'the best of faith defeats the worst of religion.' When he says that, he is focusing our attention on the noble, life-giving elements of religion in a given culture, versus the worst of the religious-based ideology which ultimately devolves into chaos, tyranny, and despair. I come back to this statement time and again when we talk about African solutions to African problems. I feel that USAFRICOM and CJTF-HOA should do everything possible to support AMISOM's mandate in Somalia, especially through religious affairs engagements," said Sheldon.