



Search for  
**Common Ground**  
Trust, Collaboration, Breakthroughs



# FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF ROUNDTABLES

Key learnings from Search for Common Ground in Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan 2020-23





**Search for Common Ground (Search)** builds Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) Roundtables in Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan from 2020–2023. Built into the model was a plan for sustainability which included partnerships with local organizations and a handover to them, built into the third year of the project. This report summarizes our main learnings as to what made these three roundtables succeed. We offer the report to our Search colleagues and local partners, to the wider FoRB movement internationally, and to the growing FoRB roundtables movement hosted by the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Secretariat, in order to encourage and support the future development of roundtables around the world as a key approach to advancing FoRB for all people, everywhere.

2020

2023

build Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) Roundtables in Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan



## BACKGROUND TO SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

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Search for Common Ground is the world's largest organization dedicated to peacebuilding, with a presence in over 30 countries. We have worked on religious engagement and FoRB for over 20 years, including our flagship initiative, the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, as well as innovative programming to tackle religiously motivated hate speech, reform legislation, build the engagement of youth and women in FoRB advocacy, engage religious leaders in Early Warning Early Response programs to prevent atrocities, expand peacebuilding through intra- and inter-religious activities in places of conflict, and support networking and programming across Asia. Further information about our wider work on religious engagement and FoRB can be found [here](#).



## BACKGROUND TO THE ROUNDTABLES MOVEMENT

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The Washington DC International Religious Freedom Roundtable was established in 2010 and has achieved a major impact in bringing advocates together with policymakers on FoRB issues through regular weekly meetings. It was the vision of Ambassador Sam Brownback to build roundtables all around the world. Learning from and building on the success of the Washington model, a thriving network of roundtables is now supported through the IRF Secretariat. In 2020 Search was awarded funding to build further roundtables and, learning from the Washington IRF roundtable model, made adaptations to reflect the very different needs and realities in Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan. This report captures our learning from setting up and convening the roundtables in these three countries, and comprises seven sections: Set up; Contexts; Trust; Capacity Building; Shared vision for shared advocacy; Impact; and Sustainability.



# 1 SET UP

In all three country contexts Search country teams began with a three month conflict analysis, risk analysis and FoRB actor mapping. This enabled us to have a clear understanding of **three things**:

1

how religious dynamics fed into, and were impacted by, wider social, political and conflict dynamics;

2

who the key actors were that we needed to engage, including ensuring that we built on existing good work and networks rather than competing with or undermining them, and;

3

the risks involved in inviting anyone to engage with us on FoRB issues, so that these risks could be effectively managed.

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**Do no harm** is central to our approach. The consequences of the mapping, and conflict and risk analyses, resulted in a different set up for each location, as detailed in the next section.

We also understood that trusted, expert and impartial (among the different agencies and actors involved) facilitation and chairing of the roundtables was essential to their success. Search already had a strong reputation in both Lebanon and Sri Lanka as a peacebuilding organization and convener across a range of issues; in Uzbekistan, we were already well known for our work with Governments across the Central Asia region on FoRB issues, and as we were setting up our Uzbekistan country office, we worked in partnership with a known and trusted local partner. We recruited project leads for the Lebanon and Sri Lanka teams who had track records on these FoRB issues – people who were already well networked, and respected, with experience of working on FoRB within their own country contexts.

In all three countries, following the mapping, we put together an invitation list, carefully balanced according to religious denomination and gender, while ensuring youth participation. Potential participants were then individually approached with a request to join the roundtable and the invitation itself was framed according to the conflict and risk analyses in order to help mitigate any fears people might have about participating. Those members who joined then became part of a closed group with limited further additions, by invitation only. This approach is different from that of the Washington IRF roundtable, which anyone can attend, but was essential to ensure balance (religion/belief/gender) and to enable us to build trust with and among the roundtable members.





## KEY LEARNING:

Taking the time to implement a conflict analysis in order to understand the locus of FoRB within the political, social, religious, historical and conflict context of a country, as well as to assess and mitigate risks and, in addition, to map existing FoRB actors, is critical to the successful framing, positioning and set up of the roundtable.



## 2 CONTEXTS

As outlined above, in each country we carried out a thorough conflict and risk analysis as well as a FoRB actor mapping, prior to creating the invitation list and framing the invitations. This clarified for us how different the contexts were in each country and what adaptations were needed to ensure that the roundtables were safe, successful, and effectively able to contribute to an expansion of FoRB in the particular country.



### LEBANON

In Lebanon, a large number of civil society organizations (CSOs) were already engaged on many aspects of FoRB, as throughout its history, with a wide range of religions making up the population of Lebanon, the interplay of sectarianism and religious diversity has significantly influenced its politics, culture, and society. A key need in Lebanon was for us to position the roundtable, not as competition to these organizations' existing good work, but as an opportunity to bring them together so that their collective impact could be greater than the sum of each individual part. Therefore the Lebanon roundtable was built as a coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and began with a central question – what can we achieve by working together that we haven't been able to achieve alone? The coalition chose its own name – the National Working Group on FoRB in Lebanon – and members immediately took up ownership of the roundtable, its workplan and long term advocacy goals.







## SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka, our mapping made clear that the term 'Freedom of Religion and Belief' did not have positive associations and could adversely affect our ability to set up the roundtable. The mapping also highlighted the deep and underlying tensions between religious communities, particularly between the Buddhist majority and the minority religions. Dealing with these tensions would be critical to the success of the roundtable as well as to future progress on FoRB in Sri Lanka. Our invitation list was therefore composed of leaders from Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. Bringing together Buddhist monks and nuns (Bhikkhuni) into regular dialogue with senior leadership from other religions was key to the success of this roundtable. It was called an 'Interreligious Roundtable', a name that our mapping indicated would be more likely to bring leaders to the table. The Sri Lanka roundtable also brought in CSO leaders and youth leaders, and was particularly strong in achieving a gender balance by moving beyond traditional male religious leadership to include women researchers, Buddhist and Catholic nuns, and youth leaders.







## UZBEKISTAN

In Uzbekistan it was clear from the start that we would not be permitted to build a roundtable without the support and engagement of the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA). This turned out to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand this meant that every single roundtable meeting – the date, agenda, venue, and invitation list had to be agreed upon in advance and sent out through the SCRA. At the same time, the SCRA was fully engaged from the start of the project and present at every meeting, which provided religious leaders in Uzbekistan with the only regular platform in the country to engage directly with the government about their concerns. From the beginning we partnered with a local organization that already had the trust of the government – the Centre for the Study of Regional Threats.



Our approach highlighted the need for a deeply contextualized approach to building these three roundtables, to reflect the political, historical and religious dynamics of each country. This meant each one looked slightly different from the original and successful Washington roundtable model, so that each was truly responsive to, and therefore more effective within, their specific context.





## KEY LEARNING:

'Context is everything'. Carefully listening to local leaders and actors and adapting the model to the local context, enables the roundtable to be locally grounded, balance needs with interests in each country, and to seize opportunities to open up a greater space for FoRB.



# 3 BUILDING TRUST

In **Lebanon** we built mutual trust with fellow NGOs, experts and researchers, by demonstrating that our intention was through collaboration, to build trust among the different actors working on FoRB in Lebanon, and to enhance and support their success, not to compete with them.

In **Sri Lanka** it was critical to build the trust of the religious leadership by demonstrating that our intentions were positive and that their participation would not result in undue risk, including from their own religious communities who might not support interreligious dialogue or action.

In **Uzbekistan**, to gain the trust of the Government, we chose a local partner that already held its trust and set as our goal the facilitation of a sincere and open dialogue, without blame and shame, among the members of the roundtable, religious leaders and government alike. At the same time, we also had to ensure that the religious leaders felt safe, that their presence was welcome, and that they would not be penalized by the government for anything they might say.



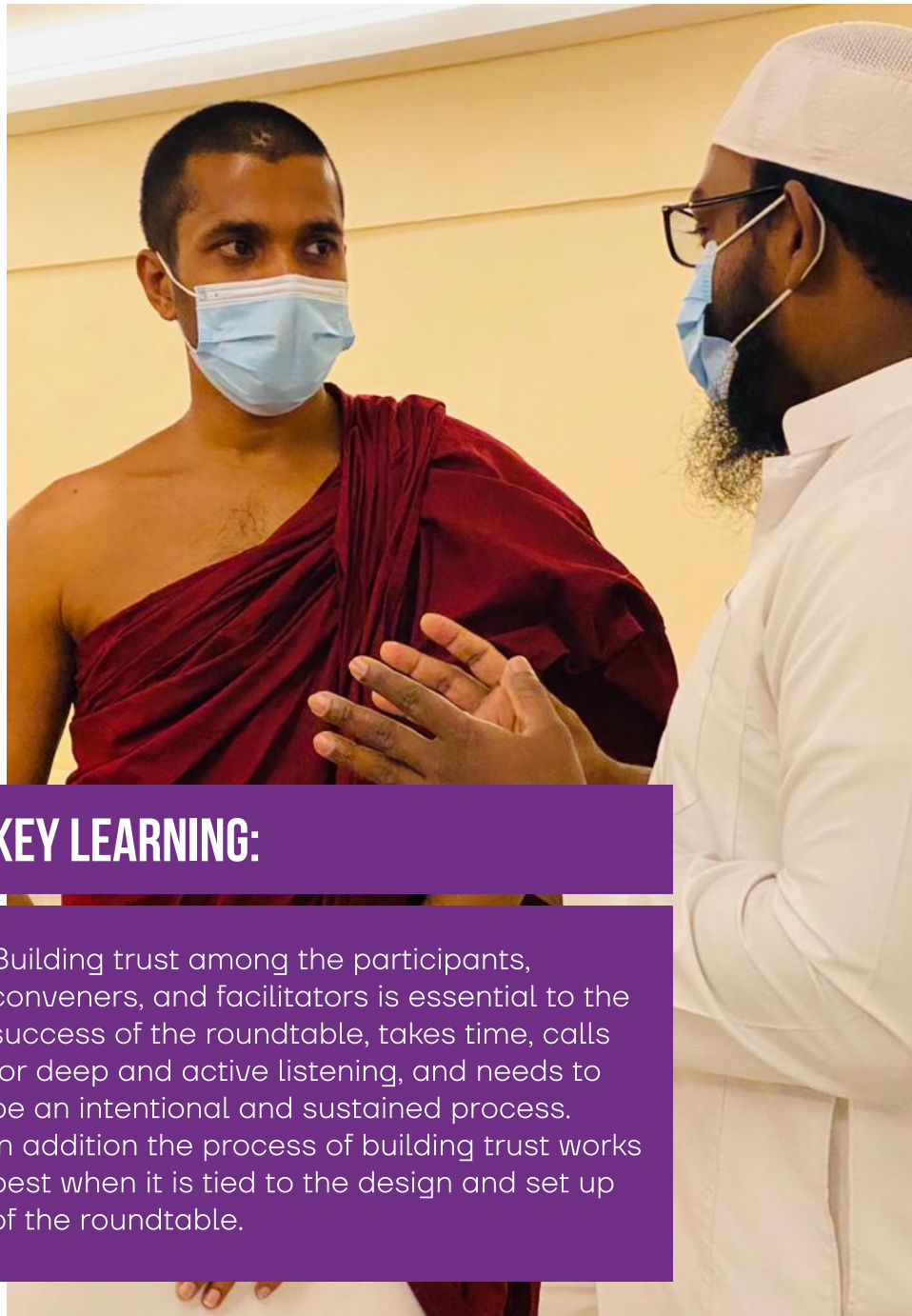
Our teams recognized that critical to the success of each roundtable was the need to build trust – and that this was a careful, long term process based on the country context.



In all three countries, Search for Common Ground's existing reputation as a trusted, impartial, locally rooted peacebuilding organization, not faith-based but religiously literate, with expertise in religious engagement and management, as well as the specific skills, networks and reputations of our project leads, enabled this process of trust building.

Trust building started with the initial outreach to NGOs in Lebanon, and with the Uzbekistan Government and in the framing of the invitations as well as the in person conversations that accompanied invitations. It continued throughout the project with regular contact with the roundtable members. In Sri Lanka a Whatsapp group meant Search staff were able to stay in regular touch with the members throughout the pandemic lockdowns in 2021 and the Aragalaya protests of 2022, keeping up their engagement and motivation through the many months when the roundtable members were not able to meet in person.

Trust building was also intentionally built into the initial activities of the roundtables, to enable members to get to know one another within a safe environment and share their thoughts and questions, including about the others' beliefs, concerns and perceptions of FoRB. Insistence on the use of Chatham House rule, also a requirement of the Washington Roundtable, proved essential to the sense of safety and wellbeing of roundtable members.



## KEY LEARNING:

Building trust among the participants, conveners, and facilitators is essential to the success of the roundtable, takes time, calls for deep and active listening, and needs to be an intentional and sustained process. In addition the process of building trust works best when it is tied to the design and set up of the roundtable.







## 4 CAPACITY BUILDING

Early on we recognized that there was a deep need for capacity building among the roundtable participants. The NGOs we engaged with **in Lebanon** were mostly very confident in advocacy and had extensive experience engaging with religious leadership, and their capacity needs were related more to coalition building, management of the Working Group as an ongoing platform, and how to use a peacebuilding approach to bring about change. **In Sri Lanka** religious actors expressed their desire to learn about other religions, but did not fully understand the meaning of FoRB and/or whether it was something they felt they could support. They were also not trained or equipped for advocacy. Similarly, **in Uzbekistan**, religious actors were lacking in confidence about advocacy, both in expressing their views to the government within the roundtable meetings, and in engaging in external advocacy. They also felt ill equipped to deal with the rising tide of hate speech and extremist views online.

Some training and capacity building had been intentionally planned for the participants; others were tailored to specific needs and requests of the participants in each country. Capacity training included: the Common Ground Approach to Religious Engagement, specific input and FoRB training from local experts, training in digital media and effective approaches to tackling hate speech online, support and mentoring in coalition building and facilitation, and training in the Common Ground Approach to Advocacy – a non-adversarial approach to advocacy.

This training and mentorship both served to equip the roundtable members in engaging more effectively in the roundtable meetings themselves and in their external advocacy, and served the additional purpose of building mutual trust and a sense of shared vision and ownership of the roundtables.





## KEY LEARNING:

Identifying and responding to the capacity needs of the roundtable members adds value to the roundtable experience and enables its greater effectiveness through skills enhancement. In particular, Search's methods and common ground approach (active listening, empathy skills, and conflict sensitivity) supported the shared ownership of a vision for cooperation and advocacy, across dividing lines.



# 5 BUILDING A SHARED VISION FOR SHARED ADVOCACY

In closed political environments and more fragile states, a collective approach to advocacy by religious groups is both more effective and impactful, and enables greater safety.

Unlike the Washington IRF roundtable which operates in a relatively open and free political context, and which doesn't need or seek to build consensus, we were setting up roundtables in contexts where activism can be dangerous and where there exists a long history of mistrust and even violence among religious communities, and between religious communities and the State. In these contexts, working towards a shared vision, a shared advocacy plan, and collective advocacy, was key to the success and impact of the roundtables.



## IN LEBANON

the purpose of the roundtable – named by members the Working Group – was established from the start as an advocacy coalition, rather than just a network, working to find consensus as the basis for shared advocacy, which would achieve more than if they acted individually. This led to a shared advocacy plan, the building of a common database, the development of a joint White Paper and first ever National Report on FoRB in Lebanon, and the launch of a joint advocacy campaign.



## IN SRI LANKA

it took many months of dialogue for the members to agree on a collective vision for FoRB, and where they saw opportunities to promote it. This resulted in two main advocacy actions. First, the religious leaders reached out to religious institutions to engage in shared, multi-faith visits in order to promote religious tolerance and understanding. In a country which has experienced deep religious tensions and violent conflict, to have Buddhist monks visit Muslim Madrassas for dialogue based on mutual respect was already a huge step towards creating fertile ground to advance FoRB. The second area agreed for a collective approach to advocacy in Sri Lanka was to focus on the education system, with development of teaching materials and a policy statement. This was identified by the roundtable members themselves as both a key need and an area where they believed that together they could make a difference to the practice and policy of education.

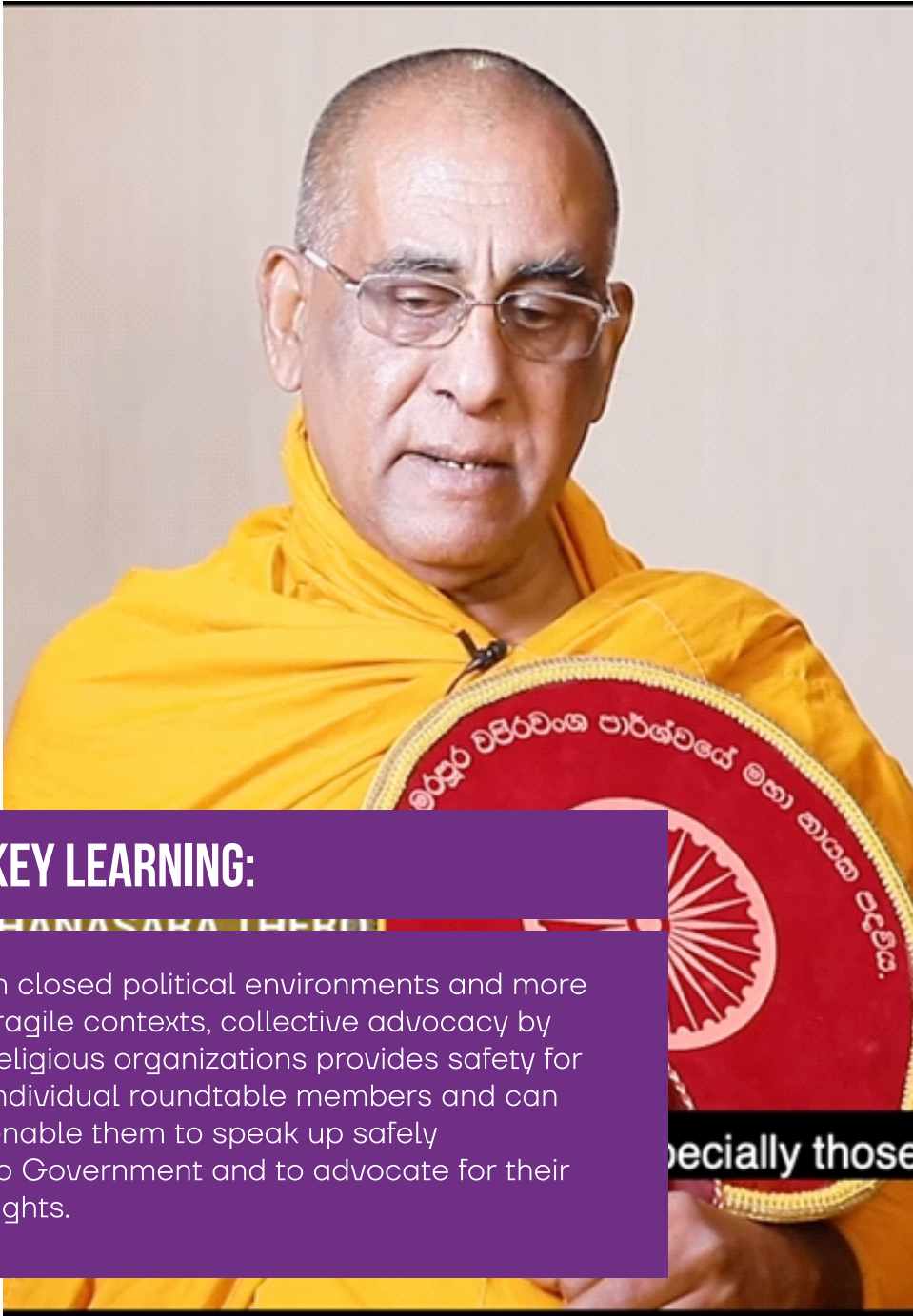


## IN UZBEKISTAN

individual advocacy by religious actors and communities is extremely challenging. While the particular context, with SCRA and other government ministries present at every meeting, meant it was impossible to form a collective advocacy strategy towards the government, what we were able to achieve was consensus among roundtable members and government agencies on the key topics they wanted to discuss together. This included for example, the need to tackle polarization, hate speech and extremism online. The roundtable in Uzbekistan created a space to build common ground with the government and enable them to work with religious communities, both majority and minority religious leadership, as partners – a first in Uzbekistan.

As indicated above, this slow, careful approach to finding common ground and building a shared advocacy strategy for collective action was critical to creating impact in these three countries. This differs from the Washington roundtable approach where people highlight individual or communal concerns to policy makers, and/or support an opt-in approach to campaigns, which works well in Western contexts.





**KEY LEARNING:**

In closed political environments and more fragile contexts, collective advocacy by religious organizations provides safety for individual roundtable members and can enable them to speak up safely to Government and to advocate for their rights.

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The impact of the three roundtables is multifaceted and ongoing. The roundtables have been handed over to local organizations, and we can see across all three countries a growing trust among religious leaders, between religious leaders and government, and within the civil society sector working on these issues. The growth in relationships and trust has expressed itself in numerous ways, from formal invitations by Imams to Buddhist monks to visit their madrassas in Sri Lanka (mentioned above), to informal and growing contacts between the roundtable members, and in advocacy initiatives that they are taking forward individually and/or together, outside the formal efforts of the roundtables.

Specific impacts of the three roundtables include:

### IN LEBANON

the Working Group members together produced the first ever National Report on FORB in Lebanon. Presented to an international audience both in person and online on July 18 2023, with a welcome from Fiona Bruce MP, UK Special Envoy for FoRB and IRFBA Chair, and a written introduction to the report by Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, who both acknowledged and welcome the significance of the report. At the same time, a shared advocacy campaign was launched, led by the well respected Adyan Foundation, which now hosts the Lebanon FoRB Working Group.

### IN SRI LANKA

during the Aragalaya protests in 2020, roundtable members recorded interfaith messages of peace and tolerance that reached 125,881 people through social media. Commentators worldwide commented on how unusual it was that these protests did not (as protests often have in Sri Lanka) lead to increased religious tensions and persecution of minorities. The roundtable members contributed to the wider sense of unity among religious communities throughout these protests.

### IN UZBEKISTAN

media coverage of discussion at the first roundtable meetings led to a public declaration by the Government about the multi-religious nature of Uzbekistan and the need for tolerance and respect for people of all faiths. The Centre for the Study of Regional Threats, our local Uzbek partner NGO, has now secured a Memorandum with the Government, ensuring that the Uzbekistan roundtable will continue to meet, providing a permanent and unique platform in Uzbekistan for regular engagement between the Government of Uzbekistan and Uzbek religious leaders.

At the kind invitation of the IRF Secretariat, the roundtable leaders have also addressed the Washington IRF roundtable to speak about their work, and the IRF Secretariat attended a meeting of the Lebanon Working Group online, thus linking these three roundtables to the wider IRF roundtable movement.





## KEY LEARNING:

All three roundtables achieved significant and varied impacts relevant and appropriate to their country contexts. Recognizing and valuing the wider impact of relationship building leading to mutual trust, and how this continues to ripple through the different societies, is also a significant learning.



# 7 SUSTAINABILITY

Search for Common Ground recognized from the start that sustainability was critical and addressed this by building strong partnerships and relationships with the government in Uzbekistan and with local partner organizations in all three countries.

Built into the project design was the handover of the roundtable secretariat to a local partner during the third year of the project, including funding for mentorship support by Search to the local organizations to ensure effective continuation.

Sustainability takes many forms. Resources matter, but equally crucial are the trust, relationships and shared vision that have been at the heart of this work from the beginning and which are the critical underpinnings for any future collective action.

Sustainability is also visible in the wide range of initiatives that have emerged alongside and because of the roundtables. In Sri Lanka, based on the reputation of the roundtable, Search was asked by local authorities and the Ministry of Justice to provide FoRB training to their staff. Search has so far responded to requests to train 224 Government officials in FoRB in three local districts across the country. In Uzbekistan, Search has been asked to provide digital literacy training to religious institutions in the country, beyond the scope and formal end of the roundtables project.

## IN LEBANON

the Working Group has been handed over to the Adyan Foundation, a leading local organization with a long track record on FoRB advocacy. Adyan is actively seeking funding to enable it to continue hosting the roundtable, promote the national advocacy campaign, and to advance the many initiatives the Working Group members have planned to take forward together.

## IN SRI LANKA

Sarvodhya Shanthi Sena has been an active and crucial NGO member of the Sri Lanka roundtable from the start, bringing decades of experience across a wide range of social issues in Sri Lanka to the discussions. Enjoying the respect and support of all the roundtable members, Sarvodhya was selected by them to take on the roundtable secretariat. Sarvodhya is currently working with the roundtable members to write a module for use by educators and a policy report aimed at the Government, as the key elements of the education advocacy campaign of the roundtable, and has linked up with another local NGO, the Zam Zam foundation, to ensure the roundtable can continue to meet.

## IN UZBEKISTAN

the handover to the Centre for the Study of Regional Threats (CSRT) was very smooth because they co-hosted the roundtable with Search for Common Ground, from the very first meeting. CSRT has been able to secure a Memorandum with the Government which ensures that the Uzbekistan roundtable has formal status and will continue to meet after the end of this project.





## KEY LEARNING:

Sustainability needs to be factored in from the beginning and included within the implementation plan. Resources matter and are needed for sustainability. But equally if not more important are local, trusted leadership, and time taken to build trusting relationships with Governments, local partners, and among the roundtable members themselves, which in turn creates buy-in and ownership of the roundtable. Training provides the skills needed so that local actors can continue the work independently, enabling the roundtables to continue to meet and bear fruit long beyond the initial investment.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Search for Common Ground would like to thank both our funder, and the Washington IRF Secretariat, for their support and encouragement throughout this project, and the IRF Secretariat for including our roundtables within its growing IRF roundtable network.

Most importantly, we want to thank all the local partners, religious leaders, researchers, advocates, activists, government officials and youth leaders who have been part of the roundtables and enabled them to succeed. Your time, commitment and investment has made the roundtables a beacon of light for the FoRB movement around the world from which it can draw learning and encouragement.

*Search for Common Ground, September 2023*