

## The Third Annual Washington Darbar Conference

**Theme: Religious Freedom in a Changing World**

**Organized by: Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS)**

**Location: Washington, D.C. | Date: TBC**

### Concept Note

#### Background

The Washington Darbar is an annual interdisciplinary conference organized by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) in Washington, D.C., designed to foster intellectual dialogue on major religious, cultural, and political debates shaping contemporary societies. The inaugural conference, held on 26 September 2024 at George Washington University, explored the theme of Post-Islamism and examined evolving political and intellectual developments within Muslim societies. The second conference, hosted on 29 September 2025 at Georgetown University, focused on the historical and contemporary relationship between Jewish communities and the Persianate world, highlighting centuries of cultural interaction and coexistence. Building on these discussions, the third Washington Darbar conference will focus on Religious Freedom, one of the most pressing normative and policy issues of our time.

#### Rational

Religious freedom remains a central pillar of modern human rights frameworks and democratic governance. However, its interpretation and implementation vary significantly across societies, political systems, and religious traditions. Around the world, governments and societies continue to grapple with balancing religious freedom against other important principles such as social harmony, national identity, and public safety. Meanwhile, technological transformations—especially the rise of social media and artificial intelligence—are reshaping the ways religious expression, debate, and conflict unfold in the public sphere. At the same time, questions about the status of religious minorities, the right to dissent from religious norms, and the principle of “freedom from religion” remain contested in many parts of the world, particularly in some religiously conservative contexts. The proposed conference seeks to provide an interdisciplinary platform for scholars, policymakers, civil society leaders, and technology experts to examine these evolving debates and explore constructive approaches to protecting religious freedom in a rapidly changing global environment.

#### Conference Objectives

The conference aims to:

- Promote interdisciplinary dialogue on the concept and practice of religious freedom.
- Explore comparative perspectives on religious freedom across major religious traditions.
- Examine the relationship between religion, secular governance, and liberal political values.
- Assess regional and global variations in the protection of religious freedom.
- Evaluate the role of technology, social media, and artificial intelligence in shaping religious discourse.
- Discuss the role of international organizations and policy frameworks in promoting religious freedom worldwide.

## Key Themes

The conference will address several major themes, including:

- Comparative perspectives on religious freedom within monotheistic and polytheistic traditions.
- Religious freedom and secular governance, including tensions between religious rights and state policies.
- Religious freedom in Muslim-majority societies, including debates surrounding the principle of freedom from religion.
- Technology and religious freedom, focusing on the role of social media platforms and artificial intelligence in shaping religious expression and discourse.
- International governance and religious freedom, including the role of institutions such as the United Nations and the annual global religious freedom reports produced by the United States Department of State.

## Conference Activities

The conference will include a diverse set of academic and cultural activities:

- Panel discussions featuring leading scholars from religious studies, political science, public policy, and social sciences.
- Fireside conversations with policymakers, intellectuals, and practitioners.
- Book presentations and reviews highlighting recent scholarship on religion and society.
- Cultural Program: “Rumi Night in Washington”, celebrating the 819th anniversary of the Persian poet and mystic Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. The event will be hosted at Museum of the Bible and will feature poetry, music, and reflections on Rumi’s message of spirituality and human unity.

## Participants

The conference will convene approximately 80–100 participants, including:

- International scholars and researchers
- Religious and community leaders
- Civil society organizations
- Government and diplomatic representatives
- Media professionals
- Technology and policy experts

## Outputs and Impact

Following a Call for Papers, the conference’s academic committee will select outstanding scholarly contributions for presentation.

Key expected outcomes include:

- Publication of an edited academic volume based on selected conference papers.
- Development of policy-relevant discussions and networks among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.
- Strengthening intellectual dialogue on religious freedom across regions and disciplines.

## Partnership Opportunities

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies welcomes collaboration with academic institutions, foundations, think tanks, and international organizations that share the conference’s vision of promoting constructive dialogue on religion, freedom, and pluralism. Partnerships may include co-hosting, program collaboration, research contributions, and financial support.

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