



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

Interreligious Dialogue on Diversity, Tolerance and Social Cohesion in the Arab Region

Open Dialogue with Religious Leaders, Scholars and Community Mediators

1-2 November 2016

Le Méridien Amman, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

Draft Concept Note

I. Background

The Arab region has been historically known for its religious and cultural diversity and long described as the cradle of religions and civilizations. Geographical, historical, political and cultural factors have given rise to a region known for its rich social fabric and multi-faceted political and cultural dynamics. Most recently, an increased utilization of an intolerant extreme religious discourse by religious-based political ideologies have crafted the manipulation of religious text to serve their opportunistic political and destructive ends at the expense of tolerance, pluralism, social cohesion and inclusivity. At a time when the potential of 120 million youth¹ in the Arab region is at risk of being exploited and radicalized by extremist organizations, working at all levels to counter the roots of extremism is no more a luxury.

The followers of Islam in the region belong to various sects and schools of thought such as the four Sunni schools of Fiqh, numerous Shi'a sects and Sufi orders. Christianity and the various Christian Churches (Copts, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Evangelicals, Armenians, Assyrians, etc.) have played a central role in shaping the region's identity. Jews and other minorities such as the Yazidis and Sabaeen-Mandean religious community have also contributed to the richness of the region's social fabric.² The region is also home to Armenians, Kurds and other ethnicities. Unfortunately, geopolitics and the rise in violent clashes and wars have changed the religious and cultural landscape of many Arab countries.

¹ World Population Prospects, Population Division, United Nations.

² There are almost 317 million Muslims and 13 million Christians in the Middle East-North Africa region. Pew Research Center, accessed on <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/07/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/> and <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

Religious, ethnic and political pluralism, which resembles an absence of discrimination and sociopolitical privileges on the basis of individuals' creeds and convictions³, have remarkably dwindled not only in the Arab region but worldwide. In recent years, the world has witnessed new waves of violent extremism that have taken the lives of many innocent people of different faiths, races and nationalities. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been more than a nine-fold increase in the number of deaths from violent extremism and terrorism, rising from 3,329 in 2000 to 32,685 in 2014⁴. Whether based on religious, ethnic or political grounds, these extremist ideologies forcefully oppose the rise of a more tolerant and cohesive society.

Most recently, an increased utilization of an intolerant extreme religious discourse by religious-based political ideologies have crafted the manipulation of religious text to serve their opportunistic political and destructive ends at the expense of tolerance, pluralism, social cohesion and inclusivity. At a time when the potential of 120 million youth⁵ in the Arab region is at risk of being exploited and radicalized by extremist organizations, working at all levels to counter the roots of extremism is no more a luxury.

Since 2010, the deliberate strategy by Daesh to erase entire communities on ethnic or religious grounds and all those who refuse to submit, including Muslims, is a grave development in the recent history of the Arab region. A report released in 2014 by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) warned that Daesh may have committed genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in its attacks against ethnic and religious groups.⁶ Reported incidents of violence, child marriage and imposition of the full-face veil against Muslim and non-Muslim women indicate that women of the Arab region are suffering the most.

Moreover, informal statistics about the number of youth recruits from Syria, Iraq and Tunisia and other and stories of how Dash has managed to appeal to youth from all regions through a targeted social media propaganda deserves full attention. This trend of extremism poses a grave threat to the pluralistic nature of a region known to be ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse and has rendered conflicts as protracted. Here, it is also important to emphasize that this unfortunate phenomenon of violent extremism is not only of relevance to the Arab region. In fact, violent extremism along racial or religious lines has also been in the rise in other regions such as Europe, North America and Southeast Asia. At the other end, Islamophobic hate crimes and hate speech has been in the rise in the United States, and the Charleston shooting of June 2015 has brought to the forefront the issue of segregation and equality. European countries also share fears over Islamophobic

⁴ Institute for Economic and Peace, 2015; Global-Terrorism-Index-2015 (available at <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>)

⁵ World Population Prospects, Population Division, United Nations.

⁶ UN News Center, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50369#.VfAzt-qpBc> accessed on 12 September 2015.



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

and discriminatory practices against immigrant-origin residents. India has also been facing a resurgence of religious rhetoric and political radicalism against the Muslim and Christian minorities.

In the Arab region, the ability of violent extremist groups to expand and project themselves across boundaries has grown exponentially over the last decade. Widespread social and political intolerance, as well as marginalization and alienation of individuals and groups is contributing to fragmenting societies and fueling conflict and extremist ideologies. Many young people in the Arab countries have been recruited by violent extremist groups in their own countries or abroad has heightened the urgency to adopt necessary measures to combat this phenomenon. In response to these challenges, security-based approaches have taken precedence, but achieved limited success. More than ever, there is a need for religious leaders, thinkers and community mediators to join forces to address this renewed phenomenon of extremism in the name of religion.

Global, regional and national efforts to combat extremism

Against this daunting reality, collective efforts have been by various organizations and influential figures at different levels to revive the pluralistic vibrancy of the world, and more specifically the Arab region. At the global level, the UN Secretary-General released in January 2016 the UN's "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism", which lays out a global framework to addressing violent extremism. In the same month, hundreds of Muslim scholars and intellectuals from over 120 countries and under the auspices of Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco issued the "Marrakesh Declaration" on the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim majority countries to affirm their commitment to diversity and citizenship as well as principles of justice and equality in front of the law.

Last September, the UN Member States positioned tolerance and understanding for diverse ideas and cultures at the heart of the new development agenda. Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits Member States to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." The Agenda envisages a just, equitable, tolerant and socially inclusive world, where there is respect for human rights, for race, ethnicity and cultural values. Over the same period, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) released the Athens Declaration condemning violence in the name of religion and in support of equal citizenship for religious and ethnic groups. More recently, the UN General Assembly adopted in July 2016 a resolution on the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy, with the aim of security peace and prosperity for succeeding generations.



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

At the same time, the UN Security Council Resolution 2242 on Women, Peace and Security commits to a gender analysis of the drivers and impacts of violent extremism, in recognition of the differential impact on the human rights of women and girls of terrorism and violent extremism in terms of their health, education and participation in public life. UNDP's own corporate Strategic Plan for 2014-2017 calls on the organization to further strengthen its support for inclusive and accountable governance; human rights; the rule of law; and the building and application of national and local capacities for conflict prevention. It also calls for the promotion of gender equality. In December 2015, the UNDP also gathered global and regional actors to develop a multidimensional and multidisciplinary framework for combating violent extremism.

At the national level, many Arab countries are in the process of designing a strategy to prevent and combat violent extremism from a development and human-rights approach. Jordan is the first Arab country to adopt a national strategy to combat violent extremism.

II. Rationale: What is the role of religious leaders, scholars and community mediators in promoting tolerance and social cohesion?

While precise estimates about the number of followers of every religion and sect are almost absent, it is important to note that such statistics give only a fleeting idea about the role of religion in the makeup of societies and its impact on individuals' lives. The relationship between religion and individuals in terms of belief, identity and practice cannot be easily captured. Beyond the individual level, how different social and religious groups interact among themselves and with religious institutions and the role of religious leaders and scholars is another important layer that is worth exploring. Despite the scarcity of demographic statistics disaggregated at the ethnic level, it remains a fact that religious minorities and some ethnic groups have been fleeing some Arab countries at a larger pace in the last decade, escaping political oppression, economic grievances and discrimination. And while these unfortunate factors have affected most social groups, discriminatory practices at the political, economic and social levels made it much more difficult for certain groups to survive.

Role of religious leaders and institutions in social service provision

Religion is recognized as an important part of the cultural and socio-political fabric of the Arab region, similar to other regions. It plays a significant role in the lives of individuals and communities. At the institutional level, religious communities⁷ through faith-based organizations (FBOs) play an

⁷ Religious communities broadly refers to both female and male religious actors and to systems and structures that institutionalize belief systems within religious traditions at all levels –from local to global. These include: (1) Local worship communities (e.g., churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, etc.), (2) Denominational leadership (e.g., bishops, clerics, ayatollahs, lamas, etc.), (3) Scholars, theologians and religious educators, (4) Mission workers, (5) Youth faith or inter-faith groups, (6) Women of faith networks, (7) Faith-based or faith-inspired organizations, (8)



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

important role in social service provision, especially in education and health. This is especially the case in countries where the government is ineffective and state institutions are weak. In rural areas, FBOs have been active in raising awareness on development issues and also as the primary source of humanitarian assistance, especially at times of emergencies. Since the 1970s, the United Nations system has forged partnerships and engaged with FBOs and religious leaders. As of early 2000s more UN organizations have been partnering with the FBOs among other civil society organizations (CBOs).⁸

Together with UN organizations, religious leaders, especially Muslim scholars, have also taken the lead in opposing female genital mutilation and assuring their congregations that it is not an Islamic obligation. In Kenya, the decision by Muslim religious leaders to talk about the dangers of female genital mutilation (FGM) during Friday prayers in 2007 has turned into a significant campaign against the practice.⁹ In Egypt, community-level abandonment of female genital mutilation was rapidly accomplished through community dialogue processes that included a religious affirmation that this cultural practice has no religious basis and thus supported its abrogation.¹⁰ In November 2006, Professor Ali Gomaa, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, issued a Fatwa banning FGM. This role is not only restricted to countries of the Arab region. The role of religious leaders in several countries in Asia-Pacific was important in raising rural communities' awareness about forest protection and reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.¹¹ In this regard, the United Nations is well aware that religious leaders and scholars have the potential to play a substantial role in the post-2015 development agenda as community-based service providers and social mobilizers towards realizing the sustainable development goals (SDGs).¹²

Role of religious leaders in promoting social cohesion and in preventing violent extremism

Fifteen years after the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which recognized the responsibility of upholding the “principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level” and “respect of equal rights of all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion” and on the eve of

Denominational, ecumenical and intra-religious institutions, umbrella organizations and networks, (9) Inter-faith institutions. UNICEF (2012). *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children*.

⁸ UNFPA (2014). *Religion and development post-2015: REPORT OF A CONSULTATION AMONG DONOR ORGANIZATIONS, UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES AND FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS*, accessed on: <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/DONOR-UN-FBO%20May%202014.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.irinnews.org/indepthmain.aspx?InDepthID=15&ReportID=71087>

¹⁰ UNICEF (2012). *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children*, accessed on: [http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_\(UNICEF\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_(UNICEF).pdf)

¹¹ UN-REDD Programme. *Asia-Pacific Lessons Learned: Role of Religious Leaders*, FAO, UNDP, UNEP, accessed on: http://www.unredd.net/index.php?option=com_docman&view=document&category_slug=asia-pacific-lessons-learned-series-749&alias=10161-asia-pacific-lessons-learned-role-of-religious-leaders-10161&Itemid=134

¹² UNFPA (2014). *Religion and development post-2015: REPORT OF A CONSULTATION AMONG DONOR ORGANIZATIONS, UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES AND FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS*, accessed on: <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/DONOR-UN-FBO%20May%202014.pdf>



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

endorsing the new development agenda, social, political and economic exclusion on the basis of identity seems to be widespread. Exclusion on the basis of identity takes place in two forms, people are either banned from practicing their identity and/or are discriminated against purely on the basis of religious, ethnic or cultural identities, among other affiliations.¹³ The result of the absence of equal citizenship in legal, political and economic rights lead to a feeling of societal grievances at the individual level, which would then trick down to the communal level creating psychological blocs between social groups and the state and also among different social groups who have sometimes forcefully positioned themselves at unequal levels of power. When members of a religious or ethnic group are denigrated, the intervention of religious communities becomes a prerequisite to mend the social fissure and defend the multicultural society. Furthermore, when religious or ethnic identities dominate national identities, this carries room for potential division and societal polarization. In this context, an inter-religious dialogue becomes utterly necessary. Compounded with the manipulation and hijack of religious identities by a group of radical extremist, interreligious-dialogue between religious groups and community mediators becomes not only necessarily but a duty.

Women as religious leaders and influential community actors

In the vast majority of cases, and simply said: men exclusively initiate and participate in wars, only to later reconcile and transition back to peace, or otherwise remain in indefinite hostility. During such transitions, women and youth are often discussed as victims of war and its collateral damages. Little due notice is thus given to the particular sufferings, concerns and demands of women during warfare, and especially after within peace talks. The importance of women's participation in reconciliation and peace-building has but recently been acknowledged and conceptualized within formal international conventions—namely the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000), on women, security and peace and the subsequent Resolution 2122—setting high-grounds for the essential contribution of women in peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping.¹⁴ The contribution of women (and youth) is essential. It is grounded not only on the basic assumption that in the developing world only, adolescent girls represent 600 million, and that the global population as a whole witnesses a youth bulge, but also on the proven impact of women as 'key drivers of the radical change' of mindsets, institutions and cultures.¹⁵ The contribution of women to the culture of peace and inter-religious dialogue and acknowledgment and advancement of women as agents of conflict prevention, reconciliation and peace building presents a unique opportunity to join all efforts

¹³ Bhargava (2004). Background paper for HDR 2004: Inclusion and exclusion in South Asia: The Role of Religion. Human Development Report Office. UNDP.

¹⁴ For more details: [United Nations Security Council Resolution \(UNSCR\) 1325 \(2000\)](#).

¹⁵ United Nations, (9 September, 2014). [Speech by UN Women Deputy Executive Director Lakshmi Puri](#). *High-level Forum on the Culture of Peace*, New York. See also: http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/68/events/culture_of_peace.shtml



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

to reverse the extremist narrative ascribed to religion, especially Islam. Needless to say, women have been the first victims of this narrative and of sectarian-fed wars.

Women are emerging as leaders in faith traditions, in different roles and capacities. As religious preachers, bishops, writers in the field of spirituality and religious reform, professors in Sharia law, activists for social justice and peace, journalists on inter-faith dialogue, women in the Arab region have started to gain acceptance in undertaking a more active role. A new generation of female religious leaders in Islam, known as *morchidat* has started to gain momentum in Morocco since 2006. In an attempt to counter violent extremism following the Casablanca suicide bombings in 2003, female Muslim leaders became involved in offering spiritual and religious guidance to young people in mosques, schools, hospitals, prisons and rural villages.¹⁶ Farida Banani, a Moroccan professor of law is also an expert in Islamic Fiqh and have assumed a pioneer position in defending gender parity and women's legal, economic and political rights based on references from the Qur'an and Prophetic hadith¹⁷. The assignment of Khoula Al Faqih as the first female Shari'ah judge in Palestine in 2009 marked an unprecedented move in Islamic judiciary which usually favors men over women based on cultural norms rather than Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁸ In Egypt, MADA Foundation was founded by a group of Egyptian women to address social problems facing women and explore how to deal with them through messages conveyed in Friday sermons.

III. Objectives and Organization

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) in partnership with King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) are convening a two-day open dialogue with religious leaders (and scholars), thinkers and community mediators to discuss rising intolerance and violent extremism in the Arab region.

The aim of the open dialogue and follow-up working group discussion is to initiate an inter-religious discussion on the factors threatening the religious, cultural and ethnic diversity of the Arab region and explore means of countering the rise of violent extremism and enhancing social cohesion through innovative narratives and tools. This dialogue, bringing together a wide range of religious leaders and representatives of religious institutions of different religious faiths, scholars and community mediators will serve as a platform to think of and formalize new ways that religious leaders and institutions can adopt in consolidating societies against the threat that extremism poses, while

¹⁶ Batha, E. (May 2015). *Morocco's Islamic women preachers lead social revolution*, Reuters, accessed on: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/19/us-morocco-women-morchidat-idUSKBN0040MG20150519>

¹⁷ فريدة بناني وزينب معادي. دليل تكريم النساء في النصوص المقدسة. برنامج الأمم المتحدة الإنمائي ومشروع إدارة الحكم في الدول العربية.

¹⁸ Melhem, A. (2009). Palestinian female judges gavel down taboos, Al-Monitor, accessed on: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/palestine-female-judge-sharia-judiciary.html>



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*

focusing on the values that the core of every religion upholds in reducing inequalities and reinstating equity and social justice.

The aim of the conference is to discuss and analyze:

- 1) the role of religious leaders, scholars and religious institutions in enhancing tolerance and social cohesion and protecting the pluralistic nature of Arab societies;
- 2) mechanisms and tools to countering extremist narratives at the local, national, regional and global levels, with a special focus on education and media; and
- 3) development of engaging policies and innovative tools, primarily in education and media.

It will address the following questions: How religions and religious institutions in the Arab region could work together towards common goals: well-being of people and sustainable development within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; How religious leaders can contribute to deflating sectarian, ethnic and cultural conflicts and tension; How can women, working with religious leaders, scholars, etc. ensure that the environment is encouraging to their full engagement at all levels; How can religious institutions and education pioneers teach and strengthen mutual respect and peaceful co-existence on equal grounds through education; and what are the mechanisms and tools to counter extremist narratives.

The main outcome is a series of concrete recommendations in the short- and long-term on how religious leaders, scholars and community mediators from different backgrounds can act together in order to challenge extremist narratives and foster social cohesion.