

Meeting on the role of religious leaders from the Middle East and North Africa in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes

PLAN OF ACTION

Introduction

The prevention of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity (atrocity crimes) is primarily the responsibility of States, but is a multilayered endeavor to which different societal actors can contribute. In this regard, religious leaders have a fundamental role to play, given their spiritual leadership and influence over so many different and important communities. When they speak out, their messages have the power to multiply.

This Plan of Action is the result of two days of consultations among religious leaders from different faiths, as well as faith-based organisations, experts, the United Nations and other inter-governmental organisations, to develop a strategy for religious leaders from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to prevent and counter incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.

The meeting revealed that incitement to hatred, hostility and violence is prevalent in the MENA region, with instances of incitement preceding and/or accompanying violence and atrocity crimes in countries affected by conflict and/or violent extremism as well as in countries considered to be relatively peaceful. The meeting also revealed that the targets of incitement include religious communities, in particular religious minorities as well as women.

Through this Plan of Action, religious leaders and religious actors committed to break the silence and speak out to prevent, respond to and counter incitement speech.

The Plan of Action includes recommendations to religious leaders, States, inter-governmental and civil society organisations.

Recommendations to all actors

- Advocate for and promote freedom of religion and belief;
- Keep in mind that the terms 'religion' or 'religious' must be applied broadly and without exclusion¹
- Strengthen cooperation between all stakeholders involved in the prevention of incitement to violence, including the State, religious leaders and institutions, civil society organisations and intergovernmental bodies;
- Adapt and implement this strategy to prevent and counter incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence against women, including conflict-related sexual violence.

¹ Heiner Bielefeldt, A/HRC/19/60 Section III B and A/HRC/22/51 Section III B 4.

Recommendations to religious leaders

(i) Support and promote ethical principles that are common to all faiths and beliefs

- Recognize that human rights principles are embedded in all religious scriptures/texts;
- Respect and protect all people - not only those sharing one's own religious faith or belief - from hatred, hostility and violence, including their incitement;
- Safeguard the right of those with different faiths and beliefs to practice their religion, not only the right of those who share one's own faith ;
- Differentiate between speech that causes offence and speech that could constitute incitement to hatred, hostility and violence;
- Advocate for and promote equal citizenship of all populations;
- Set an example by one's own principled behaviour both within and outside one's community of believers.

(ii) Create a network of religious leaders

- Establish a network/coalition of inter-religious leaders and actors from the MENA region whose main objective will be to prevent and counter incitement to hatred, hostility and violence.
- This network/coalition could also serve as a forum to address other human rights violations that are being justified on religious grounds, such as early or forced marriage and sexual slavery;
- Members of the network/coalition should keep each other informed about any measure taken to prevent, counter and respond to instances of incitement; initiate joint statements/responses; and coordinate actions, including through social media;
- Consider establishing a Committee of Religious Leaders from among the participants of the Amman meeting who could coordinate this network and provide overall guidance on specific measures to prevent, respond to and counter specific instances of incitement;
- This Committee could also identify religious leaders and inter-faith actors who have large audiences and engage them to take action to prevent and counter incitement speech with alternative or counter messages;
- Women should be equally represented in this network/coalition and specific messages on the protection and empowerment of women should be included in the strategies and actions developed and undertaken.

(iii) Denounce incitement and develop a strategy to counter the narratives that underscore incitement

- Monitor, compile and circulate periodically statements, including *fatwas*,² by religious leaders that incite to discrimination, hostility and hatred for the purposes of making religious leaders aware of such statements, and prepare effective responses;
- Issue and circulate periodic reports of religious statements, including *fatwas*, by religious leaders attacking or denouncing incitement and/or offering alternative messages³;

² A *fatwa* is a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority.

- Disseminate religious messages, including from the holy scriptures, that are linked to and promote fundamental human rights;
- Be pragmatic and proactive. Do not stop at denouncing incitement but develop counter actions;
- Disseminate positive and alternative speech online and offline;
- Disseminate success stories of preventing and countering incitement;
- In partnership with State institutions, identify extremists who have changed their views and behavior and make their stories public, with their consent, including through online and offline media;
- Disseminate positive images and stories about faiths other than one's own;
- Engage in dialogue with those with extremist views, understanding and dismantling/countering their arguments using religious scriptures and messages;
- Identify and train "youth ambassadors," in partnership with State institutions and civil society organisations, to become front-line actors in the fight against radicalization and violent extremism;
- Ensure that counter and alternative messages are disseminated in local languages, including in local dialects.

(iv) Engage in intra and inter-faith dialogue to respond to incitement

- Learn about religious beliefs different from one's own, including by participating in exchange programmes between different faiths, especially during religious festivities;
- Discuss, including in public settings, acts of intolerance against religious groups different from one's own. For instance, rabbis could discuss acts of Islamophobia with their communities and imams could discuss acts of antisemitism within theirs;
- Engage in dialogue with religious leaders from within one's own belief who hold radical views.

(v) Express solidarity with and show respect for others

- Express solidarity with religious communities different from one's own that have been or are being the target of incitement⁴;
- Show respect for the history, culture and traditions of faiths different from one's own and call on one's own religious community to do the same⁵;
- Be visual: disseminate pictures and videos of religious leaders from different faiths undertaking activities and praying together.

³ For instance, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, a senior Iranian cleric, issued a *fatwa* stating that Bahá'ís should be allowed citizenship rights and should be the subject of Islamic compassion. This could be used as a model *fatwa*.

⁴ An example of this solidarity is the American "Shoulder to Shoulder" initiative that was established by American religious leaders from different faiths to respond with one voice to Islamophobia (<http://www.shouldertoshouldercampaign.org/>).

⁵ This may also help to reduce tensions and the risk of violence in sensitive situations/during periods of tension. For example, some Rabbis in Israel asked Jews to not go to the Temple Mount, in Hebrew and Arabic, in traditional and social media, to show religious tolerance.

(vi) Education of youth

- Educate young members of one's community to understand and interpret religious messages and teaching in order to be able to identify and respond to both positive and negative messages.

Recommendations to religious institutions

- In partnership with the State, establish training/continuing education centers for members of the clergy. The education at these centers should focus on the principles of moderation, respect for "the other" and universal human rights;
- Promote exchange programmes between different faiths, and facilitate participation of own clergy into this programmes;
- Organise periodic interfaith meetings with students of religion;
- Promote the idea that religious shrines should be places of religious understanding and mutual respect.

Recommendations to States

- Ensure respect for freedom of religion and belief within State territory;
- Support civil society and interfaith dialogue groups, in particular those with initiatives aimed at monitoring, preventing and countering incitement as well as at proposing inter faith activities (e.g. sport and cultural events);
- Cut off all means of funding religious preachers with extremist views and religious sites where radical ideas are disseminated;
- Disseminate information about activities aimed at promoting alternative narratives.

(i) Engage with Religious Leaders

- Support the issuing/dissemination of religious messages, including fatwas, denouncing incitement to hatred, hostility and violence;
- Provide endorsement, support and protection to religious leaders who encourage and uphold interreligious respect and solidarity;
- Support the dissemination of information that undermines extremist arguments;
- Encourage and support interreligious dialogue activities;
- Implement a holistic approach to preventing incitement to hatred, hostility and violence rather than a punitive and security approach.

(ii) Legal framework

- Domesticated and apply relevant international human rights standards, including those relating to freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of religion and belief and freedom of peaceful assembly and association;
- In relation to the above, repeal existing national legislation and policies that restrict freedom of association and peaceful assembly, including the ability to monitor, report and respond to incitement to hatred;

- Ensure respect for freedom of expression and opinion while preventing incitement to religious hatred. Differentiate, in national legal frameworks, between insult and incitement to violence, as per the definition in Article 20 of the ICCPR and disseminate information to explain the difference. While some messages may be insulting to many, they may not constitute incitement⁶;
- Criminalize the practice of Taqfir⁷ based on the Tunisian example.

(iii) Access to the means of information/communication and freedom of the press

- Promote media pluralism, including the right of national, racial, religious and ethnic minorities to freely access and use media, information and communications technologies for the production and circulation of their own content, as well as for the reception of content produced by others;
- Stop and refrain from financing online and offline media that produce and disseminate hatred;
- Ensure that laws criminalizing storage of extremist materials do not penalise religious leaders and others who collect extremist materials for the purpose of countering incitement messages.

(iv) Education

- In partnership with civil society, religious institutions and intergovernmental organisations, train religious leaders on the effective use of social media to prevent, respond to and counter incitement. This may also help to bridge the gap between religious leaders and youth;
- Review schools curricula to integrate respect for freedom of religion and belief and the values of diversity to ensure that education promotes the rights of all communities, without discrimination;
- Include education on different religions, not only the dominant religion, in schools curricula. Include also education on spirituality (which focuses on the ethical principles that are common to all religions) in these curricula;
- Train school teachers on the principles of global citizenship and human rights;
- Create spaces where children and youth from different religions and cultures can meet and interact.

Recommendations to inter-governmental organisations

- The Islamic Fiqh⁸ Academy should take positions against *fatwas* that are inciting discrimination, hostility and violence against religious groups, including against minorities;

⁶ In this regard, one should be mindful that Governments may use “incitement” charges inappropriately against religious minorities and political opponents;

⁷ *Takfir* is an Arabic word that literally means “pronouncement of unbelief against someone,” and can be translated as “excommunication.” In Islam, *takfir* is the notion that an individual, including Muslims, may be excommunicated if they does not follow Sharia law in its strictest sense.

⁸Islamic Fiqh Academy is an Academy for advanced study of Islam based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was created at the decision of the second summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference 1974 and inaugurated in February 1981.

- Religious academies that are promoting inter-religious understanding should be strengthened, i.e. given more financial and human resources to prevent and counter incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence. In this context, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) should strengthen the mandate of its newly established Observatory of Islamophobia to include all forms of discrimination, hostility and violence against other faiths and minorities, including in OIC member-states;
- The Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission of the OIC should establish an annual prize with a financial award to a few civil society organisations that have projects dealing with preventing and countering incitement. Establishing this prize would be a sign of Islamic States' support for tolerance;
- The OIC should organize an anti-Takfir convention and ban radical *fatwas*;
- The OIC should finance NGOs to undertake activities that undermine extremism;
- UNESCO should develop guides on religious diversity, aimed at school children in particular;
- The United Nations should take a more prominent role in supporting the work of religious leaders as well as inter and intra religious groups to prevent and counter incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence as well as to violent extremism;
- Intergovernmental organizations should support NGOs to introduce civic education and education in critical thinking through extra-curriculum activities at the community level.

Recommendations to civil society organisations

- Civil society organisations, in partnership with State and religious institutions, should provide parents in general and mothers in particular, given their potential to notice and counter extremist influences, with support and access to information to help them recognize and react constructively to signs of radicalization in their children in order to dissuade them from joining radical groups and/or convince them to dissociate themselves from such groups;
- Implement activities that bolster global citizenship education and critical thinking at the grassroots level, including through activities that promote religious and cultural diversity through arts and sport.