



7th Global Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Baku, Azerbaijan, 25-27 April, 2016

Breakout Session “Religious Leaders and Violent Extremism: The Challenges of Prevention”

Background

Violent extremism is often seen and cast by the media and general public as having deep links to religion. This is not surprising because many violent extremists use religious rhetoric and ideology, and pervert interpretations of religious scriptures to justify their savagery. In the affected theaters, religious leaders of various faiths are actively engaged in preventing and countering violent extremism.

Recognizing the important role of religious leaders in this area, the President of the General Assembly in conjunction with the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations convened a High-Level General Assembly Thematic Debate on “Promoting Tolerance and Reconciliation: Fostering Peaceful, Inclusive Societies and Countering Violent Extremism”.¹ The second day of the event featured high-level statements and interactive panel discussions with faith leaders on community engagement aimed at countering violent extremism.

This session will continue the discussions from the Thematic Debate of April 21-22, 2015 with a focus on the challenges for religious leaders in taking steps to prevent violent extremism. Although religious leaders have deep authority and credibility and wide-ranging networks (in some cases), they also face several challenges.

While exploring the means of promoting the role of religious leaders in PVE efforts, it is important to note the UN Secretary General Plan of Action on PVE with its stress on engaging religious leaders to provide a platform for intra – and interfaith dialogue and discussions through which to promote tolerance and understanding between communities and voice their rejection of violent doctrines by emphasizing the peaceful and humanitarian values inherent in their theologies.

Among the challenges facing religious leaders is the immediate challenge of the dangerous security environment in areas where violent extremism is common. This insecurity is on two levels. First, there is the threat from extremists themselves to moderate and peace-building religious figures. This is particularly worrisome in those countries where general insecurity is rife. From [Nigeria](#) and [Russia](#) to [Sri Lanka](#), moderate religious figures have been killed or face threats to their lives. A second threat is the violence and human rights violations from governments themselves, which affects the credibility of religious leaders in promoting dialogue and peace.² Religious leaders who engage in dialogue with violent extremists to reform their ways must not be viewed with suspicion and placed under surveillance by state authorities. These actions undermine religious leaders’ outreach, at best, and may even push them to the other side, at worst.

A medium-term challenge is the disparity of media messaging between violent extremists and religious

¹ This [event](#) was held at UN Headquarters, New York, April 21-22, 2015.

² As one [Nigerian participant](#) at a 2014 meeting said, “If you come with aid in the right hand, and a drone in the left, that creates questions”.

leaders. Violent extremists have been adept at utilizing modern methods of communication – particularly [online](#) – to reach out to the disaffected and vulnerable sections of the population, particularly youth. They are often packaged in slick videos and bite-sized messages. By contrast, the messages of many conventional religious leaders against extremism and violence may be woven in dense webs of theological references that make many eyes – especially those of youth – glaze over in boredom.

Both in content and form, the training of religious leaders needs to be reformed to address modern realities. This is an important but long-term challenge. It is indeed necessary for religious leaders in training to be well-versed in the particulars of their own faith. However, in this globalized world, there is also a necessity to be well-versed, in an open and dialogic way, in the contexts and basic tenets of other major faiths and beliefs.³ Religious leaders must also closely examine the content of their curricula in schools that train future religious leaders to eliminate narrow interpretations and biases. Such actions can contribute to religious leaders playing key roles in fighting religious prejudice, which can lead to polarization and extremism. Finally, besides training future religious leaders to deliver commentaries in their places of worship, they must also be taught to communicate effectively through the use of modern media.

³ This was emphasized by the UNAOC [High-Level Group Report](#) of November 2006 in para 6.8: “Education systems, including religious schools, must provide students with an understanding and respect for the diverse religious beliefs, practices and cultures in the world”.