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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 given that many violent extremists use religious rhetoric and ideology, and pervert interpretations of religious scriptures to justify their savagery and divide people. In the affected theaters, religious leaders of various faiths are actively engaged in preventing radicalization and violent extremism.

Recognizing the role of religious leaders in preventing violent extremism (PVE) and promoting the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, the United Nations Secretary General enshrined in its Plan of Action on PVE the importance for faith and community leaders to mentor “vulnerable followers so as to enable them to reject violent ideologies” and promote “tolerance, understanding and reconciliation between communities”.

The Plan of Action on PVE also places emphasis on the spread of radicalization and violent extremism in prisons. A number of those who succumb to recruitment by terrorists are radicalized and recruited in prison. Therefore, safeguards need to be put in place to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies to other prisoners, and religious leaders from all faiths must be involved in these efforts.

Security challenges for religious leaders are not limited to prisons. Challenges are increasing 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. Religious leaders who engage in dialogue with violent extremists to reform their ways must be encouraged and supported by state authorities-

Key questions to be raised:

1. What is the current role of religious leaders in PVE? Who are they? And are they involved in effective measures to counter terrorism?

2. What kind of research and action programs could be implemented in collaboration with religious leaders to avoid the spread of radicalization and violent extremism, including in

prisons? Should the governments be hiring prison chaplains from all faiths and develop clear frameworks for these actions?

3.How to empower faith and community leaders who are committed to prevent violent terrorism?

4.How to reform the message and image of religious leaders in order to reach out and inspire the Youth? How do they counteract the destructive messages of extremists with counter narratives? How do they correct unfair and inaccurate perceptions of religion and encourage critical understanding?

5. How do religious leaders contribute to build peaceful and inclusive societies?

In the continuity of the 2015 UN Thematic Debate, this session will allow us to address the necessity for religious leaders to adapt to modern realities, not only on a substantive level, but also on the form, through communication, training and education programs, in order to reach out to people vulnerable to the attraction of violent extremism. In a second phase, we will explore the role that religious leaders must play in fighting religious prejudice, providing counter-narrative to the misuse of religion and hate speech, which can lead to polarization and extremism.