This volume collects the proceedings of the Study Seminar "Religion, Peace, and Security: Challenges and Prospects in the MENA Region", promoted by the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE) and the Religion & Security Council (RSC) in Rome on 5-6 May 2022. The event brought together an international group of scholars, experts, religious leaders, military officers, and civil society representatives, with the goal of examining the potentialities of the "religious factor" in the Mediterranean and the Middle East as a "driver" of peace and security.

During the Study Seminar, experiences, analyses, and recommendations were shared to better understand and enhance the role of religions in the international security strategies focused on crisis management, conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict stabilization in the MENA region. In particular, three main domains were examined: interreligious dialogue; countering radicalization and violent extremism, fostering reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

At odds with the view associating symbiotically religion to war and instability, this volume is of great value for policy-makers, practitioners, researchers, students, and all the stakeholders interested in addressing the nexus between religion, peace, and security in the MENA region, where crises and conflicts need the positive and constructive engagement of the "religious factor" as part of their solution.

NATO
Security Force Assistance
Centre of Excellence

RSC RELIGION &SECURITY COUNCIL

"RELIGION, PEACE, AND SECURITY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE MENA REGION"

Edited by

Emiliano Stornelli – Sihem Djebbi

Proceedings of the Study Seminar held in Rome on 5-6 May 2022

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"RELIGION, PEACE, AND SECURITY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE MENA REGION"

E. Stornelli – S. Djebbi (eds.)

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The **NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE)** is a multinational entity accredited by NATO as a "Centre of Excellence", with Italy, Albania, and Slovenia as Sponsoring Nations, and Austria as Contributing Participant.

By virtue of its high potential, deriving from multiple military and civilian professionals and the use of a holistic and multidisciplinary approach, the Centre is a hub of reference in the Security Force Assistance field at the national, international, and NATO levels.

The Centre provides expertise to contribute to the development and experimentation of concepts and doctrines, and also acquires and elaborates lessons learned, contributing to the definition of development models capacity in support of local forces in crisis zones where there is a NATO operation or mission approved by the North Atlantic Council.

Further, the Centre conducts educational and training activities for instructors, mentors, and personnel belonging to other nations.

To broaden its spectrum and benefit from different perspectives, the Centre collaborates with universities and international civilian and military organizations to provide a unique capability to the Alliance and NATO Partners.

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RELIGION & SECURITY COUNCIL

The **Religion & Security Council (RSC)** promotes the role of the "religious factor" in conflict resolution and peace-building, highlighting the potentialities of religions as a driver of peace and security, rather than crises and instability.

To fulfil its mission, RSC designs and implements interreligious dialogue programs involving religious leaders, decision-makers, officials, scholars, practitioners, and civil society organizations. Moreover, RSC advocates for sound and balanced approaches to religious scriptures and doctrines to counter radicalization and violent extremism.

RSC is committed to the promotion of human rights and religious freedom against sectarianism and discrimination, and supports the efforts to achieve reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in post-conflict and troubled contexts.

Many of the crises of our time require the positive and constructive engagement of the "religious factor" as part of their solution. Therefore, RSC aims to address the nexus between religion, peace, and security as the way forward for countries, peoples, and communities to prevent confrontation, ensure the pacific settlement of disputes, advance dialogue, mutual understanding, and partnership relations.

www.religionandsecurity.org

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BACKGROUND
NATO SFA COE-RSC STUDY SEMINAR

"RELIGION, PEACE, AND SECURITY:
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE MENA REGION"

This volume collects the proceedings of the Study Seminar **"Religion, Peace, and Security: Challenges and Prospects in the MENA Region"**, promoted by the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE) and the Religion & Security Council (RSC) in Rome at the Air Force's Officers Club, on 5-6 May 2022. The event brought together an international group of scholars, experts, religious leaders, military officers, and civil society representatives, with the goal of examining the potentialities of the "religious factor" in the Mediterranean and the Middle East as a "driver" of peace and security.

The Study Seminar developed over three thematic sessions, focused on: 1) Interreligious Dialogue in Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building; 2) Addressing Radical Thinking and Violent Extremism; 3) How to Foster Reconciliation and Peaceful Coexistence. Each session featured two keynote speakers, who gave a 30-minute presentation, followed by a roundtable discussion that allowed all participants to share their views and recommendations on the topics dealt with.

The proceedings were coordinated by RSC Chairman Emiliano Stornelli and Dr. Sihem Djebbi, Associate Professor at the University of Sorbonne Paris Nord

and the Pontifical Faculty of Theology of Southern Italy. RSC Chairman Emiliano Stornelli and Dr. Sihem Djebbi are also the scientific editors of this publication, which is the final output of a wider editorial initiative that included the dissemination of papers and reports on the main contents of the Study Seminar.

The Executive Committee of the project featured, besides RSC Chairman and Dr. Djebbi, Col. Massimo Di Pietro, NATO SFA COE Director; Lt. Col. Michele Sciannamea, NATO SFA COE Concept Development & Doctrine Branch Head, and Executive Committee Coordinator; Maj. Gianpaolo Pauciulo, NATO SFA COE Chief of Defense Staff Officer; Maj. Davide Li Pira, NATO SFA COE Public Affairs Officer; OR-4 Oliver Dario Ferretti, NATO SFA COE Director's Personal Assistant; Maj. Ludovica Glorioso, NATO SFA COE Legal Advisor; Ms. Shireen Al Mashaqba, RSC Senior Fellow and Head of the Cultural Relations Section, Hashemite University of Jordan.

NATO SFA COE-RSC cooperation aims to enhance the cultural and situational awareness on the role of the "religious factor" in crisis management, conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict stabilization, as a relevant component of the SFA efforts within the comprehensive approach framework of NATO missions and operations.

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INTRODUCTION

"RELIGION, PEACE, AND SECURITY":
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND GOALS

Col. Massimo Di Pietro
Director, NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE)

The NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE) acts as a SFA focal point for the Alliance in the promotion of research, doctrine development, and training activities aimed at supporting stability and reconstruction processes in crisis scenarios. By adopting a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach, the NATO SFA COE carries out its mission along three main lines of efforts: policy, human capital, and support to operations.

In the "policy" line of effort, the NATO SFA COE develops all NATO concepts and best practices related to SFA, integrating them in the revision process of the already existing NATO's doctrines, and delivering independent research and publications. In the "human capital" line of effort, the NATO SFA COE develops projects and initiatives that concur in enhancing the capacities, knowledge, and situational awareness of NATO's personnel, so as to support NATO in providing the "best prepared people, in the right place, at the right time, every time". As for the "support to operations" line of effort, the NATO SFA COE takes all necessary actions to support NATO's command and force structures in improving their

ability to plan and conduct SFA activities across NATO's missions and operations. The effectiveness of SFA depends on: a good analysis of the mission area; a planning process since the very beginning of the crisis; and the synchronization of the efforts along the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, accompanied by a continuous assessment.

In this context, the NATO SFA COE's areas of responsibility are also extended to the so-called "Cross Cutting Topics" (CCTs), including a range of subjects that fall outside the primary military domain, but are still relevant to the success of NATO's missions and operations. NATO's recognized CCTs are: protection of civilians; children and armed conflict; sexual and gender-based violence; cultural property protection; building integrity; women, peace, and security. Another subject to be considered closely in the comprehensive approach for SFA activities is the role of "religious factor", especially as referred to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Therefore, the Study Seminar organized by the NATO SFA COE and the Religion & Security Council (RSC) meets the need to promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise on a crucial issue for peace, security, and stability in NATO's southern flank and the whole Euro-Atlantic community.

Mr. Emiliano Stornelli
Chairman, Religion & Security Council (RSC)

The NATO SFA COE-RSC Study Seminar is a major example of civilian-military cooperation, and of the high-level results it can achieve also in the scientific and cultural domain. The proceedings engage speakers and discussants from different backgrounds and countries, united by the same purpose: to address the role of the "religious factor" in the security sphere, with particular focus on the MENA region.

As a matter of fact, many of the conflicts and crises of our time have a religious dimension, and this is all the truer for the MENA region, where religions have long been misused to trigger warfare, inter-state and domestic tensions, radicalization and violent extremism, but can also represent powerful catalysts of peace and security. However, until a few years ago, the idea that the "religious factor" could play a positive and constructive role in helping peace and security to advance was still not taken into serious consideration, neither in terms of strategic, policy, and doctrinal thinking, nor at an operational level. Talking about "religion" in relation to "security" was considered a "taboo". There was a kind of fear to face the issue, as if we were crossing a forbidden threshold for our mindset. Such a mindset produced "a lack of awareness" of the potentialities of religions as an asset in the field of crisis management, conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict stabilization.

The Religion & Security Council (RSC) was established in 2016 to contribute to fill this gap, addressing the main areas where religion, peace, and security intersect

in order to increase the awareness of stakeholders on the strategic necessity to include the "religious factor" in the peace and security equation. To fulfil its mission, RSC has been at the forefront in the promotion of interreligious dialogue programs involving religious leaders, decision-makers, officials, scholars, practitioners, and civil society organizations, as the way forward to strengthen living together and cooperation for the common good between different religious groups.

RSC has also been supporting the development of moderate and balanced approaches to religious scriptures and doctrines to counter the radical discourse and narratives, as well as the indoctrination and recruitment by extremist organizations, especially among the youth. Moreover, RSC has closely focused its attention on the predicament of religious minorities, calling for the respect for human rights and religious freedom against any form of sectarianism and discrimination.

These areas of engagement have proved to be relevant to the goals of the Security Force Assistance and have become the topics examined during the NATO SFA COE-RSC Study Seminar. The views, insights, and recommendations gathered during the proceedings will serve as "food for thought" to address the nexus between religion, peace, and security in the MENA region, with a view to preventing the outbreak of new instability and conflicts, ensuring the pacific settlement of disputes, and fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and partnership relations between local peoples and communities in a long-term perspective.

Dr. Sihem Djebbi
Associate Professor,
University of Sorbonne Paris Nord and Pontifical Faculty of Theology of Southern Italy

The Study Seminar sheds light on the specific contribution religion can provide in building peace and security. Religion has long been disqualified by political and social sciences both as a matter of study and as a valid force in society. Analytically, religion was thought to be declining inexorably as a consequence of modernity. Axiologically, it was considered to be fundamentally linked with reactionist trends.

Since the end of the eighties, this secularist bias has been profoundly revised. The apparent rise of religious claims all over the world have led many analysts to define today's era as a post-secular one. An academic consensus has been reached about the necessity to better explore the role of religion in society and politics. However, this renewed interest has resulted, over time, in overwhelming negative approaches to religion. The latter has been understood mostly as a main driver of contemporary conflicts and terrorism, especially with regards to Islam. It is only recently that academic research has started to explore the nexus between religion and peace. Religion has recently gained more importance in global governance too. Religious actors, who used to be by-passed or considered untrustworthy in international politics, have eventually acquired a certain credit. Policy-makers have increasingly involved religious entities in the definition and implementation of projects related to the public interest in order to gain legitimacy and efficiency. This has been particularly the case in the humanitarian and development arenas,

but the potential role of religious entities in the peace-building arena has not been thoroughly considered yet.

In this Study Seminar, the concept of religion is broadly understood as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices, which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them". This definition, provided by Durkheim, highlights the numerous facets of religion. Religion is both an individual and a collective phenomenon, as well as a spiritual and a socio-political one connecting cosmological views, practices, rituals, cognitive and normative frameworks. Thus, the Study Seminar pays particular attention to religious myths, rituals, doctrine, ethics, social and experiential dimensions as well as leadership, all aspects that should be addressed to help peace processes. Religion must be approached as a dynamic phenomenon, which cannot but go through processes of adaptation, transformation and pluralization, especially in a globalized era.

At the same time, it shapes and it is also shaped by social, cultural, political and economic realities. It is a powerful driver of change as well as a deeply evolving reality. It is thus crucial to embed the study of religion in the environments in which it evolves, and to consider its variations over time and space. The Study Seminar gathers a panel coming from the MENA region, and from different socio-political and religious-cultural environments. This choice is meant to provide space for the expression and understanding of the variety of local perceptions, representations and aspirations. This should help global public action in the region acquire more efficiency and legitimacy. Working on the potential nexus between religion and peace in the MENA region does not presume that the religious dimension of conflict is the primary one. Economic inequalities, social precariousness, democratic deficit, geopolitical rivalries, and environmental degradation are the leading factors. These issues provide ground for religious instrumentalization and framing, which, in turn, contribute to conflict escalation and duration. These non-religious core issues should be addressed primarily, in collaboration with, or apart from religious actors. Nevertheless, in the collective effort to build peace, certain religious realities could, and should be a precious "adjuvant".

Lt. Gen. Stefano Del Col

Director at the Supreme Council of Defense, Italian Presidency of the Republic
Former UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander

The meeting of experts organized by the NATO SFA COE and RSC is undoubtedly needed to better understand the MENA region from the religion, peace, and security perspective. In this area of the world, religions have long been misused to promote views that set neighbors against neighbors and jeopardize peaceful relations between communities that have coexisted for generations.

Religion is a powerful unifying force, but it is also easy for extremist ideologies to exploit the "religious factor" for their wicked purposes. This is where religious leaders, especially when they are far away from the political dimension, can play a major role in conflict prevention and in the reconciliation processes, by leveraging their networks and communication channels to help people separate their beliefs and religious identity from the attempts to manipulate them.

Aware of the cohesive power of religion, as Head of UNIFIL in South Lebanon, I used to engage religious leaders from different denominations in promoting non-violence, partnership relations, equality, and respect on a communal level. UNIFIL itself symbolizes unity in diversity, with troops from 46 different countries across the world. Recalling the words of the UN Secretary General António Guterres, UNIFIL is the "symbol of stability in an unstable region".

As for Lebanon, it represents a microcosm of the world with all its diversity, particularly with respect to culture, religion, and education. Therefore, the

Lebanese experience offers a fundamental contribution to the elaboration of concrete approaches aimed at addressing the topics of the Study Seminar, reminding us of the need to invest more and more in fostering dialogue, social cohesion, and a culture of peace and human rights in troubled societies and countries.

FIRST SESSION

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACE-BUILDING

The First Session of the Study Seminar examined a topic of increasing relevance to foreign affairs and security experts: "Interreligious Dialogue in Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building". The proceedings explored how dialogue and engagement between stakeholders from different religious groups can greatly contribute to promoting reconciliation, sustain stabilization, prevent warfare, and counter radicalization and violent extremism in MENA countries and on a regional level. Operating across religious and cultural boundaries, interfaith programs and initiatives have the capacity to facilitate mutual understanding, create bonds based on trust and respect, defuse tensions, and help achieve peaceful settlements, as highlighted by the keynote speakers: Dr. Elie Al Hindy, Executive Director of the Adyan Foundation; Dr. Majeda Omar, Associate Professor at the University of Jordan and Former Director of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies. The proceedings were introduced and moderated by RSC Chairman Emiliano Stornelli.

THREE LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Dr. Elie Al Hindy
Executive Director, Adyan Foundation

To examine the major role that interreligious dialogue can play in conflict resolution and peace-building in the MENA region, a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience suggest the adoption of a multidimensional approach, encompassing the various facets of insecurity and instability driven by religious-based views and identities. In particular, three levels of engagement can be singled out: 1) Political level; 2) Theological-Religious level; and 3) Social level.

Political Level

Interreligious dialogue is key to promoting the adoption of the "inclusive citizenship" model, as the first stepping stone to ensure common living, stability, and peaceful societies in MENA countries. Interfaith initiatives can help achieve mutual respect, recognition, and trust between different religious identities and groups, and this is a precondition for inclusivity to be incorporated in the constitution and legal frameworks of the state, in the form of equality before the law and respect for human rights for all denominations. Interreligious relations in MENA countries have long been predicated on exclusivity, discrimination, and sectarianism, and this has led to turmoil, violent extremism, revolutions, and external interventions, which caused further rifts and warfare, mainly to the detriment of minorities, including ethnic ones.

To be successful, however, the "inclusive citizenship" model needs to be adapted to the demands and characteristics of the local realities. The outcome of the state and institution-building process remains a democratic system, but the type of secular state that exists in the Western world is not suitable for societies where the "religious factor" maintains a central position in the public sphere, and people keep holding on to their religious identity and perceiving themselves as believers. Rather, it has already been proved that neglecting or even excluding religious identities can trigger adverse reactions and is far from an antidote to extremism.

Therefore, it is necessary to promote a complex, yet unique democratic system, capable of including and addressing the concerns of all the different religious identities, since neglecting or disparaging them would be conducive to internal strife, radicalization, and inter-state conflicts, instead of promoting peace, security, reconciliation, and stability.

To this end, interreligious dialogue can facilitate the encounter between stakeholders from different religious groups on a common platform to establish inclusive statehood and governance in MENA countries, fostering the participation in the policy and decision-making of minority groups as well, both on a religious and an ethnic basis. It must be noted that these groups have lived for thousands of years in these lands and are entitled to determine their political system, a right that they could not exercise in the past, as minorities were not allowed to have a voice in the state formation process in the region.

Theological-Religious Level

Interreligious dialogue offers the opportunity to present and promote "alternative" religious narratives, as opposed to the radical interpretations and understanding of religion, which lead to conflicts and divisions between different religious groups. The aggressive religious discourse dehumanizes the religious "other", spreads hate speech, and justifies discrimination, thus preparing the ground to legitimize the use of violence. On the other hand, huge efforts have been made in interreligious contexts to convey moderate religious approaches to scriptures and doctrines that promote tolerance, common living, mutual acceptance and respect.

However, we are still far from reaching a time when the moderate "alternative" narratives and religious discourse are the mainstream or the dominant ones in the MENA region. This means that the engagement in this field must be further

strengthened, so as to expand the promotion of the existing "alternative" narratives, encourage the elaboration of new ones, introduce them in religious schools, connect the moderate religious leaders together, and protect the champions of this frontier battlefront from all religious backgrounds.

The huge power of the faithful is being used for destruction and extremist purposes, but also for building bridges and advancing human fraternity across the religious spectrum. Faith-based actors are strongly committed to addressing the predicament of refugees, the inclusion of religious and ethnic minorities, the protection of the most vulnerable categories, conflict resolution, and peace-building. International security strategies must thus empower and build on the faith-based activism in the MENA region that strives for peace, dialogue, reconciliation, mutual respect, and "inclusive citizenship".

International security strategies should also take into consideration major official documents that have been issued in recent years, such as the Amman Message, the declarations of Mecca, Marrakech and Beirut, the Human Fraternity Document for World Peace and Living Together, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Iman of Al Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayyeb, along with the statements of prominent religious leaders, such as the Iraqi Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, and institutions such as the Organization for the Islamic Cooperation. All these endeavors are complementing and building on each other, with a view to promoting mutual respect, recognition, and dialogue between different religions, as well as addressing "inclusive citizenship" and freedom of religion and belief. Other sensitive issues will hopefully be dealt with in the near future, such as blasphemy and apostasy.

Social Level

Interreligious dialogue, besides the theological-religious level, needs to address also the social, economic, and ethical challenges affecting local communities in MENA countries. This requires a "dialogue for life and reconciliation", namely an effort to re-humanize religions aimed at building the so-called "religious social responsibility". Similarly to the corporate social responsibility for corporations, religious institutions and leaders are called to play an active role in the different dimensions of society, in order to support the needs of the population.

In particular, the "dialogue for life and reconciliation" engages middle and junior religious leaders from different denominations in cooperation activities at the

grassroot level, including charity work and fostering community cohesion. Religious educators and religious journalists are also involved, in order to achieve a higher impact on the ground and allow a greater participation of women. This is a dialogue that happens in refugee camps and poor suburbs, in soup kitchens feeding the poor and behind the scenes of battlefronts. But religious leaders can work together also in health promotion among the population, such as in the case of vaccinations, and in advocating for environmental issues, in partnership with national and local authorities, as well as international and non-governmental organizations.

Some examples to illustrate this endeavor can be found in Lebanon. The "Adyan Foundation" has established "The Forum for Religious Social Responsibility", composed of hundreds of religious leaders who have received training on basic principles such as "inclusive citizenship", freedom of religion and belief, the acceptance of the other, positive communication, and active listening, but they have been enabled also in terms of writing proposals, presenting projects, and fundraising. This group of religious leaders is now passing the message through their seminars, schools, and religious communities. Moreover, "Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation" is the name of a Lebanese non-governmental organization that coordinates the joint activities of a broad network of religious leaders in the north of Lebanon, perhaps the most tension-prone area in the country.

As for the next steps to advance the "dialogue for life and reconciliation", it is necessary to engage religious seminaries and schools attended by students from different backgrounds. Furthermore, the concept of "community policing", usually referred to law enforcement forces in local communities, should be included among the duties pertaining to the "religious social responsibility", in order for religious leaders to play a role also in promoting security and stability on the ground.

THE "AMMAN MESSAGE" AND OTHER INSIGHTS FROM JORDAN

Dr. Majeda Omar
Associate Professor, University of Jordan
Former Director, Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies

The role of interreligious dialogue in conflict resolution and peace-building stands out as fundamental in the discussion on the challenges, opportunities, and prospects of the triad "religion, peace, and security" in the MENA region. In the first place, let's focus on the main requirements for a genuine exchange between different faiths. What is interreligious dialogue about?

The Essentials of Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue inspires us to work together on the basis of shared moral, ethical, and spiritual values, with a view to shaping a culture of peace and harmony through our respective religious traditions. Interreligious dialogue calls for the acceptance of the religious "other" and the acknowledgement of the other's intrinsic worth, beyond the mere recognition of the other's theological right to exist (as professed by all the Abrahamic faiths).

This equally implies recognition of the legitimacy of the other's truth, though it may not be our own. In addition, the requisite qualities and attitudes of those engaged in interreligious dialogue are: firmness of one's religious convictions, readiness to understand people of other religious traditions, humility, comprehension,

patience, and respect. Triumphalism, which assumes the primacy of one's own values and the right to decide for others, has no place in interreligious dialogue.

As for the key challenges that confront interreligious dialogue nowadays, we can include:

– To avoid distortions and negative comparisons, conversion attempts, settling of rigid coexistence patterns, revenge, defensive and confrontational stances;

– To ensure that violent and terrorist acts are referred to as what they actually are, without justifying them by religion as such;

– To focus on family upbringing of children based on the acceptance of the other and cultivating affection, good behavior, and forgiveness, not for a limited time, but constantly;

– To concentrate on the call of the religious scriptures and doctrines to peace and respect for the followers of different religions;

– To insist on good citizenship and equality among all, regardless of religion, ethnicity, and gender;

– To further the role of religions in the development processes and in addressing the social root-causes of conflicts and extremism;

– To resolve conflicts by peaceful methods and good treatment of the other.

To meet these challenges, there is the need of a substantive new dialogue between the Abrahamic religions, centered on an appeal to our shared heritage. In the tradition of Judaism, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary".

In the tradition of Christianity, " All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets". And in the tradition of Islam, "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself".

These are quotations from the Talmud, Matthew's Gospel, and the Sunnah. The Holy Books go to great lengths to ensure co-existence between the three confessions. Yet, appeals to Abraham have still not conciliated pleas around the "holy land or holy city" or between faiths, as highlighted by Kenneth Cragg in his remarkable piece on the jewels of Jerusalem.

The "Amman Message"

The Middle East is less diverse than at any point in its millennia old history. Arab Christians were the custodians of the Arabic language during a long period of decline. They helped pioneer the "Arab Awakening" of the 19th and 20th centuries. Their numbers have dropped from 25 percent of the population to less than 5 percent over the past decade.

The region keeps being affected by unresolved conflicts and crises. During the civil war in Syria, and the rise of the ISIS threat across the Syrian-Iraqi borders, Jordan provided a safe haven for both Muslims and Christians. The protection of religious communities is an Islamic duty, and Jordan acted also consistently with its official policies to promote the authentic Islamic message, based on three major initiatives: "Amman Message" (2004); "A Common Word between Us and You" (2007); "World Interfaith Harmony Week" (2010).

In particular, the "Amman Message" exemplifies interreligious dialogue as an instrument for a culture of peace. It was launched by HM King Abdullah II as a detailed statement declaring what Islam is and what it is not, and what actions represent it and what actions do not. It sought to expound a vision characterized by flexibility and openness based on Islam in terms of the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and humanism.

Its goal was to clarify to the contemporary world the "true nature of Islam". The message was aimed not only at non-Muslims, but also at Muslims themselves, many of whom – especially the young – are confused about their own religion and what it entails.

The drafting process of the document relied upon the advice and wisdom of 24 of the most senior, recognized and influential scholars and authorities from around the globe representing all the branches of Islam, schools of jurisprudence, schools of thought and religious orientations, including: the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sunni Islam's traditionally most respected authority; the foremost Shiite Ayatollahs of Iraq and Iran; Yemen's Zaydi Maraji; the Ibadhi Grand Mufti of Oman; and the Grand Muftis and Supreme Fatwa Councils of the major Islamic countries.

Based on the decrees (fatāwā) provided by these great figures, on 4-6 July 2005 HM King Abdullah II convened in Amman an international conference of approximately 200 leading Islamic scholars from 50 countries, which resulted in the unanimous adoption of the "Amman Message".

The "Amman Message" calls all Muslims to cast aside their disagreements and unify their words and stances in advocating for fairness, moderation, mutual forgiveness, compassion, and dialogue within the Islamic fold and outside. Reminding that establishing good relations with other religions is the essence of Islam and its teachings, the "Amman Message" states: "The source of relations between Muslims and others is peace; for there is no fighting [permitted] when there is no aggression. Even then, [it must be done with] benevolence, justice, and virtue: God does not prevent you, as regards those who do not fight you in religion's [cause], nor drive you from your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them".

Moreover, the "Amman Message" elaborated on the declaration of apostasy to counter the misleading interpretations of radical and extremist groups, which caused repeated injustices, human rights violations, and violence, even to the point of killing Muslims and non-Muslims alike, for not adhering to wicked, and certainly un-Islamic, views. In the "Amman Message", declaring a person an apostate has thus been stated as impermissible, while the blood, honor, and property of both Muslims and non-Muslims are inviolable.

As a blueprint for advancing peace and security in the wider Mediterranean area, the "Amman Message" was promoted among youths, imams, academics, civil society and media representatives in Jordan, but also among stakeholders in other MENA countries (Egypt, Lebanon) as well as in Europe (Italy, Greece, Croatia, UK, Germany, Denmark). This wide program of advocacy for the "Amman Message" was held under the umbrella of the "Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies" (RIIFS), established by HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan in 1994.

Since its inception, through trainings, workshops, seminars, outreach programs and other activities, RIIFS has been in charge of raising awareness about the relevance of interreligious dialogue in Jordan and the whole MENA region, establishing ties and cooperation with key organizations, institutions, and individuals, also internationally. The promotion of the "Amman Message" continues to lie at the core of the RIIFS mission and vision.

The Military Iftaa' Directorate

Another major component of Jordan's approach in addressing the triad "religion, peace, and security" is the Military Iftaa' Directorate, established by King Abdullah I in 1944. Throughout its long history, the Military Iftaa' Directorate has been

playing a fundamental role in countering the spread of extremist ideologies and promoting a spirit of tolerance, moderation, dialogue and harmony between religions.

The "Prince El Hassan College for Islamic Sciences" is the centre that administers the training and qualifying for the Military Iftaa' Directorate, so that the Directorate can effectively implement its mission and vision in spreading the spirit of true Islam and the "Amman Message", whether among the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) or abroad.

On a national level, the Military Iftaa' Directorate is engaged in providing training courses, lectures, and cultural initiatives to Jordanian officers on the content of the "Amman Message", awareness against radicalism, and addressing violent extremism, issuing master's and other study degrees, such as those offered by the Directorate's "Military Center to Counter Extremism and Terrorism".

Furthermore, the Military Iftaa' Directorate organizes similar activities with counterparts in other Arab and non-Arab countries. As for cooperation with NATO, a Jordanian officer from the Military Iftaa' Directorate has been one of the members of the international team of experts who contributed to draft NATO's Counter-Terrorism Reference Curriculum (CTRC), published in May 2020. In particular, Capt. Dr. Akram Fraihat shared the Jordanian knowledge and expertise on the development of the skills and the capacities needed to meet the challenges and threats related to countering terrorism.

Interreligious Dialogue in the MENA Region: The Way Forward

Interreligious dialogue is an invaluable asset to advance conflict resolution and peace-building in the MENA region.

To enhance its role from a long-term perspective, new efforts need to be under-taken in the educational field at the school and university level, to actively engage the new generation in developing and cultivating positive and constructive relations between different religions. Interfaith programs should be included in the curriculum since the earliest grades, as a way to enable the students to learn more about each other's faith and develop a better understanding of the complexity of religious beliefs and worldviews, thus preventing the phenomena of stereotyping and prejudice against "the other" on religious grounds.

To become efficient, productive, and responsible citizens, the creators of sustainable future societies, the youth need learn to acknowledge diversities in

cultures and beliefs, while critical thinking needs to be fostered among them as both a religious and an educational duty, with the aim of counteracting the indoctrination to extremist ideologies, which thrive on the manipulation of religious scriptures and doctrines. Education to interreligious dialogue should increasingly target the media, focusing especially on the positive use of social networks to create spaces for the encounter and collaboration between people belonging to different denominations.

It is also necessary to achieve a greater involvement of non-faith-based actors in interreligious dialogue initiatives, including the civilian and military sectors, as a way to benefit from the partnership and cooperation between all stakeholders in crafting a value-based society, anchored on the respect for life, human dignity, justice, pluralism, strong community links, human labor and works as a source of self-actualization and self-fulfillment, not just the power that fuels economic and social development.

In this context, the "Amman Message" and its directions constitute a unique platform to further moderation and fruitful interreligious relations, leading to enhanced peace, security, and stability in the wider Mediterranean area. The promotion of interfaith programs that draw inspiration from the "Amman Message" is therefore of strategic interest for the international community, particularly for the Euro-Atlantic countries, which are called to step up their support to the efforts being undertaken in the MENA region to address the triad "religion, peace, and security", and create sustainable future societies.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

HIGHLIGHTS

Mons. Rev. Lucio Sembrano

Delegate of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, The Holy See

Why should we dialogue? Why should we get involved in interreligious dialogue? Dialogue should be without borders, as St. Francis said. He urged all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided and that a humble and fraternal "subjection" be shown to those who do not share the same faith.

Interreligious dialogue should be a common daily practice for everyone. Humility is key to dialogue, since it enables us to move from the individual to the community and the grassroots level. The Samaritan encourages us to create a different culture in which conflicts are solved through care for one another. Universal love is the solution. It is necessary to call for forgiveness, and then, on this basis, dialogue is the only weapon we have in order to fully rediscover our common roots and direct our relationships toward the common good, beyond the protection of particular interests. To quote Pope Francis: "As believers, we are convinced that, without an openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity".

However, in many countries extremism and polarization have become political tools. And if victory consists in eliminating one's opponents, how is it possible to recognize our neighbors or help those falling along the way? This applies

particularly to the MENA region, a space of ancient conflicts – still ongoing – as well as of "shattered dreams".

At the same time, it is nonsense to speak about the West and the East, we need to overcome these traditional definitions, to halt speaking about blocks, but consider the different entities within these macro-areas.

We are not all the same. Could you ever think that Israel and Palestine are the same? No, but they are in the same region. Moreover, if we do not support fragile and failing states in strengthening their political and economic systems, how can we help address conflicts and crises? What is needed is a specific approach for every different situation. If the model is not changed and adapted, if we lack an effective plan, we will spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending peace settlements.

To achieve reconciliation through dialogue, an open, honest, and patient negotiation is required. Dialogue entails the ability to acknowledge the point of view of others, which may include convictions and concerns that are different from our own, but legitimate and deserving respect and attention. Pope Francis stresses that differences are creative. They can create tension, but in the resolution of tensions lies the progress of humanity.

Lt. Gen. (ret.) Salvatore Farina
President, Army Study Center

Based on my experience as a Commander – in northern Kosovo with COMKFOR, but also at the Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum, focusing on Afghanistan, concrete actions on the ground need to be carried out jointly by all the actors who can contribute to provide stabilization, support peace, and prevent crises. This is not a formula for success, but no effort can be effective if the military, civilian, and religious sectors do not work together in projects that aim to better local life conditions, promoting economic development, and the respect for human rights. In this context, the security perspective needs to include interreligious dialogue as well, since the exchange and cooperation between religious leaders and faith-based actors can greatly help to achieve the strategic goals set by peace operations.

Dr. Michael Driessen
Associate Professor, John Cabot University

Many political scientists have criticized the "Amman Message" and other similar declarations on the grounds that they were mere public relations strategies that proved unsuccessful in preventing a new wave of religiously-based violence in the Middle East, especially with reference to the civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS. Of course, the "Amman Message" could not prevent these conflicts, nor was that its aim, and it is unfair to charge them with such a burden. That said, the

continuation of religiously expressed conflict and violence in the region nearly two decades after the "Amman Message" should provoke our reflection. How have these conflicts changed the way you think about the success or the role or the meaning of the "Amman Message" or interreligious dialogue efforts in the region in general?

Dr. Majeda Omar

Associate Professor, University of Jordan
Former Director, Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies

Many of the root-causes underlying religiously-based violence are outside the scope of the "Amman Message", and this applies also to the case of the civil war in Syria. Bad governance, the way some sectors of the Syrian society were treated, the economic predicament, the external interferences, and other factors tied to the history of the country and the broader region, together contributed to ignite the internal strife, which led to the rise of ISIS. On the other hand, addressing religiously-based violence from a theological and doctrinal perspective requires a lot of time, and tangible results can be seen only in the very long term, provided that we remain engaged in promoting the goals of initiatives such as the "Amman Message" among stakeholders and target groups, along with interreligious dialogue as an antidote to sectarianism and intolerance.

Dr. Michael Driessen

Associate Professor, John Cabot University

The conflict in Ukraine also involves a religious dimension which has some parallels to the conflicts in the Middle East. For instance, on the part of Russia we can see a return of religious nationalism and the direct support for the war by the Orthodox Patriarch. At the same time, there is also the engagement of Pope Francis to halt the confrontation and promote dialogue between the belligerents. According to your experience in addressing religiously-based violence and in promoting interreligious dialogue in multi-dimensional processes, what could we learn from the Middle East experience that can be applied to the Ukrainian case? How might dialogue efforts be used in this scenario currently affecting Europe?

Dr. Elie Al Hindy
Executive Director, Adyan Foundation

From the Middle East experience, what we can learn most importantly is that any religious form of nationalism should be definitely discouraged, because it is automatically exclusive to the other. Religious nationalism leads to troubles inside a country and with its neighbors, and is definitely not the way to go. On the other hand, according to the Middle East experience, religion and the religious identity of citizens need to be included and acknowledged, within the framework of the "civic state". The notion of "civic state" differs from the secular state because it accepts religion and promotes it as a relevant factor in society, although not in an exclusive way. This is the reason why we speak about "inclusive citizenship", which encompass the different religions and beliefs present in society, as antidotes to religious nationalism and sectarianism. Unfortunately in Lebanon, religious nationalism was a main factor in the civil war and is still manifesting itself in many ways, constantly putting the Lebanese on the verge of another civil war.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini
President, Islamic Religious Community of Italy (COREIS)
Ambassador for Dialogue among Civilizations,
Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO)

As for the difference between the secular and "civic" state, it is actually possible to acknowledge a secular state as an inclusive system that ensures freedom of religion with no double standards, and allows for the participation in the public life of religious leaders and believers, without leading to a confessional state. I am against political parties with a religious identity, but I am not against the principle that a governor of a local municipality, as much as the President or the Prime Minister, can be believers of any religious identity and succeed in managing their leadership and political role for the benefit of the whole community, non-believers included.

This is a secular neutral government. On the other hand, if government authorities and political leaders should provide the best opportunities only for their fellow believers, such a behavior would correspond to a non-honest interpretation of their religious identity.

As for the "Amman Message", this and other similar initiatives have triggered a negative reaction in the narrow-minded, radical, and ultra-confessional identities. At the same time, they have led to a major intra-faith consensus on the true tenets and fundamentals of Islam between Muslim scholars from all over the world, in order to counter the attacks against Islam waged by certain new ideological interpretations that have no relevance within the Islamic traditional doctrine.

Dr. Ziad Fahed

Professor of Religious Studies, Notre Dame University-Louaize
President, Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR)
Coordinator, Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon

To be born in an interreligious country does not necessarily mean that we are equipped to live in peace together. Living in peace together is something that we learn, for which we prepare ourselves. Peace is something that we build together. According to my experience with the Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon, when we launch interfaith initiatives on the ground, I am often surprised by the level of ignorance of each other, by the lack of mutual knowledge and understanding, although we have built the Network together and we are working shoulder to shoulder to achieve the same goals. This is most probably due to an insufficient theological preparation both of Christians and Muslims, who are not prepared enough to engage adequately in the encounter. Our theological formation should give us a rich experience based on theological texts and principles, but it does not actually prepare for what I call "celebrating the dignity of being different".

During his life, the Rasoul (Prophet Muhammad) has never lived in a religious state. Every single city he was in had the characteristic of being rich in diversity. Also, the other prophets before him, lived all their lives in culturally rich societies. Therefore, let's not be afraid of diversity. Diversity shows the existence of two types of believers: one who is not secured enough to share his own religious beliefs and traditions, and the other who is so at peace with his own religion and

has a deep understanding of it, to create interactive bridges and share the beauty of being a Muslim, a Christian, or of any another religion.

So, point number one: how to learn to live together. Number two, I would like to highlight the importance of texts such as the "Amman Message" and the "Human Fraternity Document for Peace and Living Together" signed in Abu Dhabi, as they greatly help create new spaces for interreligious dialogue and for what I call "spiritual solidarity" in the MENA region. In Tripoli and North Lebanon, I saw religious leaders living next to each other for years without ever trying to get close and enter into a dialogue.

Through the Network, we have been able to overcome these barriers, making the encounter possible. "Spiritual solidarity" is needed to contribute to heal the wounds of our societies, and the process of healing will never start without small initiatives at the grassroots level. Even just a soccer game, a walk in the street, and other small initiatives can heal and reconcile. The more we create spaces for the encounter between religious leaders and believers from different religions, the more we can move forward in working together for the common good.

Dr. Pejman Abdolmohammadi
Associate Professor, University of Trento

On interreligious dialogue and the encounter between different faiths, the discussion should extend beyond Abrahamism, since an Abrahamic-centered approach can turn out to be a form of non-pluralism and exclusivity. There are other religions as well and, although not originating from the MENA region, they are nonetheless relevant to conflict resolution and peace-building. To ensure a real pluralism, "inclusive citizenship" and the protection of minorities is fundamental, and this involves the concept of democracy as well, which may take shapes other than the Western model, in the same way as the "civic state" as a form of governance in MENA countries differs from the Western-style secular state.

Dr. Elie Al Hindy
Executive Director, Adyan Foundation

As per the essence of the term, democracy is the rule of the people and not simply of the majority, and this implies the inclusion of religious and ethnic minorities. Democracy and "inclusive citizenship" go hand in hand. On the other hand, the need for the elaboration of the concept of "civic state" lies in the twisting of the original meaning of secularism. Going back to its roots, secularism is the separation of the political authority from the religious authority, and not the separation of religion from society and from politics, as it was subsequently conceived and promoted. Religion is a major factor in society, and naturally

manifests itself in the public sphere, through its sets of values and beliefs. Accordingly, a politician who is a believer has the right to represent his or her values in politics, just as a non-believer politician does. Therefore, to be suitable for the MENA countries, secularism needs to recover its early sense and purpose, focusing on the separation between political and religious authority, and fully acknowledging religion as one of the main factors that make up the social and cultural fabric.

Dr. Elie Abouaoun

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

The crises and troubles of the MENA region are not exclusively religious in nature. They have a very marked political and social dimension, which, from my perspective, prevail over the religious one. In Libya, the issue is not religion, but the lack of governance and the poor management of diversity between the different components of society. In Lebanon, although the problem has religious facets, a deeper look reveals it is mostly political and social.

As for the secular or confessional models of state, a further reflection is needed to better define the content and the contours of these concepts. However, through adequate constitutional guarantees and power sharing arrangements, confessionals types of governance can certainly allow for equality, pluralism, and respect for human rights for all the citizens, irrespective of their religious and ethnic belonging. Therefore, the secular state that rose to prominence mainly in Europe is not necessarily to be regarded as the solution for MENA countries, since it is completely dissociated from the reality of the local societies.

Similarly, in MENA countries and Europe, or the West in general, there is a major difference in the way political parties or organizations are formed. Political parties or organizations are needed everywhere to establish any functioning and inclusive governance model. But in the societies of the Middle East and North Africa, they are mostly established around the religious and ethnic identities of the people, rather than ideologies and views referring to the left-center-right continuum. This does mean that one is good, and the other is bad. We are just different.

Dr. Francesca Maria Corrao

Professor of Arabic Culture and Language, LUISS University

The focus of dialogue between different religions and cultures is to achieve the recognition of the dignity of the "other", as a basis to bring about a real transformation in conflict scenarios. Recognition is a process whose first step is education, including the study of the history of other people and countries from the early school levels. To be sure, it is necessary to learn primarily about our own history, so as to be able to understand our own identity, but in a globalized world the identity of the "other" can no longer be overlooked, since we are increasingly called to interact with people from different religions and cultures.

This Study Seminar is an example of concrete dialogue between people from all over the world, who are engaged in working together for the sake of peace. It is a remarkable initiative also because participants have different professional backgrounds, combining scholars specialized in humanities and security experts. In another context, I would like to highlight the "Mediterranean Mayor's Forum" that has been taking place in Florence since 1958, as an initiative launched by the politician and statesman Giorgio La Pira.

The latest edition of the event was organized last February, and also featured a meeting between religious leaders and decision-makers from the two sides of the Mediterranean in an interreligious framework.

SECOND SESSION

ADDRESSING RADICAL THINKING AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The Second Session of the Study Seminar looked into the efforts carried out by faith-based organizations and religious leaders with the aim of "Addressing Radical Thinking and Violent Extremism". The two keynote speakers – Prof. Aicha Haddou, Director of Ta'aruf – Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Centre, Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas; Imam Yahya Pallavicini, President of the Islamic Religious Community of Italy (COREIS) and Ambassador for Dialogue among Civilizations, Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) – shed light on the approach adopted by a number of specific programs and initiatives in order to engage the theological field, providing an alternative and antithetic discourse to deconstruct radical and extremist interpretations and doctrines; spread this discourse among believers, especially the most vulnerable categories; develop initiatives on the ground, taking into consideration the interplay between the risk of radicalization and other factors; contain and reverse the phenomenon of religious and violent extremism. The proceedings were introduced and moderated by Dr. Sihem Djebbi, Associate Professor at the University of Sorbonne Paris Nord and the Pontifical Faculty of Theology of Southern Italy.

THE MOROCCAN EXPERIENCE

Prof. Aicha Haddou

Director of Ta'aruf – Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Centre, Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

Global affairs and media coverage remind us continuously of the rise of radicalization and violent extremism. A variety of approaches have been elaborated and implemented to deal with these phenomena, on the part of international actors, states, religious representatives, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders by focusing on the Moroccan experience.

A Multidimensional and Integrated Approach

The Moroccan state has strongly expressed its mobilization against religious extremism and radicalism. It has developed a wide range of targeted and coordinated actions at both the international and domestic levels, dealing with education, socio-economic affairs, and security. These policies, projects, and resolutions are all included in a holistic strategy designed to manage the religious field, among other objectives.

At the top of this strategic policy stands the Moroccan King, in his dual quality of state and religious leader ("Amir Al Muminin"). Under this aegis, the King is the protector of the believers in the country, be they Muslim, Jew, or Christian. He is also responsible for national unity, for the honour of the believers and the preservation of their faith, life and property. As such, Morocco is a Muslim state embedded in religious pluralism.

This is why the Moroccan policy of counter-extremism, peace consolidation, and diversity promotion is deliberately founded by the country's cultural, mystical, and religious heritage. It is also characterized by a strong connection between the security field (which largely includes prevention), and religious diplomacy. A number of antiterrorist measures reflect this integrated multidimensional approach, articulated on three key axes: the strengthening of security governance; the struggle against poverty, inequality and social exclusion; the rethinking and reshaping of the religious field. In this approach, the spotlight was put on the reaffirmation and spreading of an enlightened set of religious values such as moderation, peaceful coexistence and tolerance. It must be suggested, however, that the expression "mutual recognition" is preferred to the word "tolerance", as it conveys the idea that the other is recognized in their differences, and that they are loved and respected exactly as they are. In comparison, the term "tolerance" somehow supposes that the other is tolerated because there is no alternative choice.

One specific and main aspect of the Moroccan policy against radicalism is to invest considerably in the religious sphere, since it is considered to be the best bulwark against extremism. Indeed, one leading factor that favoured the growth of radical religious movements appears to be the spiritual and religious vacuum that pre-existed, and the fact that the religious and cultural heritage was unknown by part of the believers. In their search of identity, while seeking to get closer to religion, several young people, regardless of their country of origin or residency, have not found a clear and convincing religious offer emanating from traditional or conventional spheres. Many have consequently "cobbled" an approximate and somehow "google-shaped" Islam, using numerous biased, instrumental, and de-contextualized interpretations of Islam shopped on the internet. For example, when we check the profile of terrorists in Europe who have been trapped in radical networks, we notice that most of them did not even speak Arabic and, in many cases, had never really opened a Quran, or received any theological training. Therefore, it is paramount to work on religious content and spread it.

The singular Moroccan perspective against extremism is oriented not only towards the population living in Morocco, but also the Moroccans living abroad. Morocco intervenes for instance in the training of Imams and Murshidates (women preachers), and through the religious representatives in Europe, for example within the "Conseil Européen des Oulémas Marocains" (*European Council of Moroccan Ulemas),* created officially in 2008.

At the same time, other initiatives need to be mentioned. For example, the "Fondation Mohammed VI des Oulémas Africains" *(Mohammed VI Foundation for African Ulemas*) that was created in 2015. The Foundation's main objective is to consolidate and spread Islamic values, those of a fraternal, peaceful, and moderate Islam (Islam du "juste milieu", as it is said in French, or "wasatiyyah" in Arabic). A huge work has been initiated in this vein by the Moroccan Ministry of Habbous (Endowments) and Islamic Affairs. It has, among other actions, undertaken the training of Ulemas and preachers, women included. Enabling women to become religious leaders is very important indeed.

They have often suffered from patriarchal domination, in the religious domain and in the rest of social life as well, and have also been the first victims of religious extremism. They do have much to provide and say about Islam. They have been very proactive in the struggle against terrorism, and have been doing an extraordinary job that really needs to be valued and mediatized. Yet, women still suffer much from the lack of recognition regarding their contribution in the field of prevention. We must thus shed light on their relentless action and mobilization.

The Role of the Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

In the struggle against extremism and promotion of Islamic inclusive and fraternal values, the Moroccan experience is exemplified by the work carried out, among other institutions, by the Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas. This institution has established, in its various centres, numerous programs and initiatives dealing with the promotion of peace, nonviolence, and interreligious relations; with the prevention and eradication of extremism; and with the support to people who have been through a radicalization process. The containment of the process of religious extremism has become one of the priorities of the institution's engagement.

One of the original axes of action has been the issuing of a series of seven papers in which the violent extremist discourse is *deconstructed* through different thematic keys, such as "jihad", "sharia", "rule" or "governance", "community", "excommunication". This work aims at disqualifying the conceptual foundations that are specific to the extremist lens, and at clarifying the main Islamic concepts, "restoring" them after they have been instrumentalized and pervasively misinterpreted by extremist voices.

The Muslim world suffers from the excessive weight of the norm in Islamic exegesis and thinking or, in other words, from "norm obesity".

Most of the Quran deals actually with humanist values, education, transcending aspects, ecology, spirituality, and beauty as well as the relationship to the Other, be him or her a believer or a not. Indeed, the Quranic text is extremely rich, a point which is rarely stressed.

The Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas has thus dedicated much effort to emphasize these values and aspects, to remind people of them, and to spread this knowledge of Islam in relation to contextualized thinking. To be able to do this efficiently, there is a need for valuable theological content. This is why the Rabita offers axes of reflection and actions for the future programming on the fight against online radicalization in Marocco.

Dr. Ahmed Abbadi, General Secretary of the Rabita, describes this strategy of deconstruction as follows: "The first axis is spreading the knowledge of original Islam, which is open and moderate in its ritual and spiritual dimensions. The second axis is deconstructing the "rigorist" discourse, offering an alternative one conveyed by Ulemas (theologians) who have been habilitated. The third axis is structuring the religious field both in terms of institutions and content, in order to avoid any vacuum that could be infiltrated by extremism".

All the institutions of the Islamic religious field in Morocco (The Rabita Mohamadia of Ulemas, the Council of Ulemas, Ministry of the Habous (Endowments) and Islamic affairs, training structures such as Al Qarawiyin) collaborate closely and complementarily to achieve this paradigmatic change.

Another important action undertaken by the Rabita is related to its "Centre of study and research in the field of values", which is a unit specialized in the "struggle against risky behaviours". Its main projects are:

– The training of young leaders, taking into consideration the "strategies of community mobilization";

– The deployment of "intervening peer-educators" who are engaged in the prevention of risky behaviours dealing with issues related to violence, drug addiction, and to the shift into violent extremism. This supposes an important level of social proximity on the field and a transmission of good practices. The Institution has already trained 5000 peer-educators, in four years;

– The training of religious leaders which incorporates the notions of human rights, gender and the issues of violence and religious extremism; it also deliv-

ers a training focused on the use of social networks, social mobilization and on community dynamics;

– The training of "key actors", which concerns mainly the teachers, heads of schools, facilitators, community leaders, non-governmental organizations, and medical staff;

– The training of "peer-educators", selected among young people coming from fragile and destitute environments, in order to involve them in local dynamics;

The Rabita also trains medical staff and NGOs to tackle risky behaviours. More recently, it has also started the training of influencers and journalists.

More broadly, the "Centre of research and study in the field of values" promotes the organization of roundtables, conferences, and sensitization events dealing with risky behaviours and societal matters. These activities take place in strategic contexts, for instance in centres dedicated to professional training of youth or women, in higher education institutes, as well as in prisons.

The research unit has also strengthened its presence on the internet. In addition to the content published on a classic website, it has created an interactive online platform operating as a space to connect the youth with the broader society and religious leaders. The media production available online is quite dense. A TV channel proposes interviews, sensitization videos and messages and street surveys ("micro-trottoir"). Training sessions or other kinds of illustrations and productions are also available.

Parallel to this, the Rabita has developed a network of theologians named "Réseau des Oulémas relais" ("Network of Relay-Ulemas"). This network is oriented towards graduates from higher education, who are trained on various techniques of communication and facilitation that allow them to intervene in prisons, in youth and women centres, as well as in universities.

Moreover, the training aims at transmitting cognitive content regarding issues such as violence and religious extremism, but also stalking, gender discrimination, and addiction. This is meant to develop an adequate know-how and knowledge among the targeted populations. Eventually, the unit has developed a series of activities seeking to facilitate the social inclusion of vulnerable people into the local community, and to limit the risk of social exclusion and troubles.

The Rabita also intervenes in the frame of a larger program of struggle against violent extremism in prisons, focusing on reconciliation, rehabilitation, and

resocialization in favor of inmates who have been accused of terrorism. This program, initiated in March 2016, intends to sensitize the incarcerated population, by providing it with a consolidated discourse against violent extremism. It is carried out in cooperation with the Japanese government, and with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The objective is more precisely to propose trainings to prison directors, prison employees and detainees, concentrated on the opening to alterity and tolerance, and on countering radical discourses in prison environments. The project targets a few detainees who, after having acquired the necessary knowledge and know-how, become "peers" and animate themselves training and sensitization sessions in prison. The Rabita is fully involved in the training of such "peers", in a participative and inclusive way making it a truly innovative "reconciliation" (*Musalaha)* approach. The *Musalaha* is specifically sustained by the General Delegation to the penitentiary administration and rehabilitation, the National Council of Human Rights, and various experts.

This strategy is complemented by Al Fitra Unit, another unit affiliated to the Rabita, which intervenes in schools together with its own network of young leaders; and by the Centre of interfaith and peacebuilding, also affiliated to the Rabita, which focuses on the promotion of peace-building and non-violence, and on women leadership for peace and security.

Policy Recommendations

Morocco has succeeded in developing an original experience and in holding an exceptional position in the matter of counter-terrorism and in the promotion of Islamic humanistic values and interpretations, both in the Arab and sub-Saharan world. It is possible to notice today many positive results deriving from the multidimensional and integrated approach which have been implemented in the last decades. This approach is much appreciated abroad. Many diplomats, governments, and international institutions' representatives have expressed their interest to understand more about the axes of these programs and policies, their implementation and results. In the struggle against extremism, international cooperation is essential.

Based on the Moroccan experience, a few recommendations can be formulated to help fight radicalization and violent extremism:

− Reconnect with complex thinking, in order to enhance the understanding of violent

extremism and better struggle against it. We have to be aware that this issue is complex and that the approach to solve it is also complex. As such, only a multifaceted and comprehensive strategy of prevention and management can be effective;

– Renew the approaches in order to counter evolving processes. We have to continuously adapt to transforming phenomena and to question our theories, since new profiles of terrorists appear constantly;

– Not discount religion in the struggle against religious extremism. Some religious aspects can sometimes be a problem, and need to be identified and fought, but at the same time, in many of its dimensions, religion can offer valid solutions. The suggestion is to use it as a spiritual and theological source to build a wall against extremism and sectarianism. One should deal with religious discourses and their symbolism not necessarily as instruments of violent actors, but as sources of theological and spiritual diversity which can barricade fanaticism and ideological take over;

– Incorporate, at the core of the religious discourse, the humanist values preached by Islam, and spread them;

– Invest in a genuine and demanding interreligious dialogue with humility, taking into consideration the differences and similarities between different religious parties and doctrines;

– Share and cross research, studies, good practices, and data, for example by developing digital/online libraries and platforms for researchers and for all citizens;

– Invest further in training the youth and women for the consolidation of a good leadership. More broadly, to invest significantly in long term education, in order to provide the youth with a perspective centred on humanist values and inclusive citizenship and open them to diversity, including through religious education;

– Emphasize and acknowledge further the contribution of women in this field. Women are still insufficiently included and under-represented in the programs and policies against extremism, and under-trained in these aspects. The spheres of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization are still highly dominated by a male presence, similarly to the decision-making domain;

– Better grasp the steps, trajectories, and motivations of the people who have been through a process of radicalization and have been tempted by violent extremism.

POLICIES AND INITIATIVES AGAINST THE RADICAL DISCOURSE

Imam Yahya Pallavicini
President, Islamic Religious Community of Italy (COREIS)
Ambassador for Dialogue among Civilizations,
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Since the end of the last century, some extremist groups have been trying to use or abuse of Islam and of the Islamic doctrine for the sake of their radical agendas. In particular, a certain political Islam has inspired "reformist" interpretations that evolved toward militant and violent postures. As a response, the Muslim world has fostered a number of major initiatives, which show the advance of an institutional Islamic approach aimed at establishing both a concrete intra-faith coordination and an interreligious engagement to counter extremism.

The Wrong Path of Extremist Groups

Theologically speaking, extremist groups intend to impose a puritan view of Islam and of Muslim behavior, claiming to be a sort of inquisition for a pure Islamist nation. The result is a blatant manipulation of *sharia* (Islamic law), and the dismissal as heretical of the Islamic historical and intellectual heritage. All the spiritual, theological, juridical, and multicultural developments that occurred within Islam over the course of history are considered impure, especially due to the intermingling with the West, portrayed only as a negative model of colonialism and secular values.

From a methodological point of view, extremist groups subdue *sharia* to a process of oversimplification, taking minor references within the broader doctrinal corpus and attributing to them a priority significance out of context and disproportionately, in order to suit their radical discourse and narratives. The multiple Quranic directions dealing with differences in opinion and diversity are ignored, and although Islam does not have a monolithical structure, radical systems act as if this was the case, positing as follows: "We are the church of Islam", "we are the pure Islamic nation", "whoever wants to be a Muslim has to obey our Caliphate rules", "if you do not obey, you are a *kafir* (infidel)", "persecution and death await you" (*takfir*).

Therefore, Muslims who do not adhere to their ideology lose their status as believers, while the principle of "Ahl Al Kitab" (the People of the Book) for non-Muslims is deliberately disregarded. The notion of *jihad* is also bent to serve this evil logic, and is applied with no knowledge of the rules and of the conditions set by Islam.

Islamic Endeavors to Address Radical Thinking and Violent Extremism

The first experience of this kind has been the "Amman Message", launched by Jordan in 2004. The "Amman Message" gave birth to a unique international endeavor involving Muslims scholars from different theological, juridical, spiritual, and national backgrounds, similar to an ecumenical council. Their task was to outline a strategy to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies in Muslim societies. In the modern era, we had not witnessed such a gathering in a Muslim scholarly framework for a long time. Subsequently, most of the scholars who endorsed the "Amman Message" authored the open letter "A Common Word between Us and You", addressed to the highest Christians leaders worldwide.

The "Common Word" initiative transcends an exclusivist interpretation that pits one world against the other, focusing on the shared principles and values between Christians and Muslims, starting from their major commandments of faith. And the first two commandments underlying the letter are "love for God" and "love for your neighbor". The former distinguishes the absolute truths of the two religions on a theological level, but also implies the responsibility of taking care of relations with our neighbor to build a peaceful society. This is still the greatest challenge to be met nowadays, since searching for a common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for dialogue between selected religious leaders, but an effort that needs to be translated at the grassroots level.

Subsequently, in 2014, some of the signatories of the "Amman Message" and the

"Common Word" wrote an open letter to the so-called "Khalifa" Al Baghdadi. Among these scholars, the leading personality of Sheykh Abdallah bin Bayyah, President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, based in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates is worth mentioning. The letter was another international intra-faith effort in a Muslim scholarly framework, and features major insights in terms of counter-narratives against ISIS. In particular, the document declared the purported Caliphate as illegitimate, providing theological, juridical, and intellectual arguments to vanquish its ideological tenets, especially concerning the authority of delivering *fatwas*.

Under Al Baghdadi, the authentic Islamic methodology to issue a legitimate *fatwa* was completely cast aside, and replaced by a kind of tribunal whose task was to pronounce verdicts that had to comply with the ultra-moralistic interpretation of *sharia* promoted by ISIS. This interpretation is centered only on what is forbidden (*haram*), with no reference to the Quranic directions on justice and on mercy as a priority.

The letter exposes such a narrow-minded stance, clarifying who is the authority who can deliver a *fatwa*, the methodology and where and when *fatwas* are allowed, highlighting "contextualization" as an indispensable criterion according to the Islamic law, although it was ignored by Al Baghdadi and his followers. Moreover, the principle of "Ahl Al Kitab" (the People of the Book) has been restored, including the Yazidis as well.

The letter points out that in Islam forced conversions are forbidden, opening the way to future developments to address the issue of apostasy. The rights of women and children, the ban of torture and of any destruction of shrines and tombs of prophets and companions, are also encompassed.

In 2016, another international intra-faith initiative took place in Marrakech, convened by the Moroccan Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, and Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas, in close cooperation with the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. On that occasion, Jewish and Christians representatives were invited to join the proceedings, since the issue dealt with was "The Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities".

The meeting produced a declaration on the legal framework of the rights of religion minorities, inspired to the Charter of Medina drafted by Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH). The document advocates for freedom of worship and security, education as an antidote to the radical discourse and narratives, and for the necessity to avoid bigotry. It also condemns the denigration of any kind of religious symbol, identity, community or practice.

How to implement these principles in modern times, and in which kind of system (confessional or secular, similar or different from the one in Medina), is not clearly addressed, but the declaration deserves credit for reasserting what the very Islamic doctrine reveals about relations with non-Muslim religious minorities, as opposed to the manipulations of extremism.

An effort more specifically dedicated to contextualizing the Charter of Medina was made in 2019 by the Muslim World League (MWL), which issued the Charter of Makkah. This document has thus far not received the attention it deserves, perhaps due to the major relevance gained by the Human Fraternity Document for World Peace and Living Together signed in Abu Dhabi at the beginning of the same year by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayyeb. However, the Charter of Makkah shows that a major change is ongoing in Saudi Arabia regarding the interpretation of Islam, with a shift back to the traditional teachings that ensure the right of religious minorities to be respected and enjoy a free and safe practice of their faith.

Those who argue that this is just a public relations exercise tend to underestimate the current developments in Saudi Arabia, as well as the importance of the bold stances taken against extremist groups and terrorism by the MWL under the leadership of the new Secretary General Muhammad Al Issa, who is also supportive of interreligious dialogue as an opportunity to concretely work for peace. The Charter of Makkah calls imams and religious leaders to guide their communities according to its approach, and this is a real novelty, especially at the local level.

All these initiatives stem from the MENA region, although valued multicultural efforts can be found in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, as well as in the humanitarian Islam and in the "middle ground" (*wasatiyyah*) approach rooted in Indonesia and Malaysia.

On an international level, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect launched the "Plan of Action for Religious Leaders", a three-year program engaging representatives from the Abrahamic religions,

Hinduism, and Buddhism, along with experts belonging to secular organizations, in a series of consultations aimed at providing the agencies of the United Nations with awareness on how to counter extremist ideologies based on the experience of the participants in their own communities. The consultations developed between 2015 and 2017, and the outputs of the meetings revolved around the keywords "Prevent, Strengthen, and Build", using the typical vocabulary of the United Nations.

Policy Recommendations

– Enhance intra-faith coordination and interreligious engagement. Effective counter-narratives need to be framed and presented by reliable authorities and scholars within the religious community concerned, whereas closer cooperation based on common values and responsibilities between religious leaders and believers of different faiths is key to advancing peace and social cohesion. When religion is misused to spark hatred and conflict across religious identities and groups, it is the universal and sacred teaching of every religious doctrine on peace, justice, knowledge, and brotherhood that is betrayed, and this calls the faithful of all religions to join hands in opposing extremism.

– Prevent radical nationalism from abusing religious identity. Radical nationalism tends to combine a narrow-minded view of local habits and customs with religion, in order to boost its propaganda for political purposes. For instance, this is the case of the *burqa* in Afghanistan, where the garment is inappropriately associated with Islam and exploited ideologically to build an artificial Islamic national identity opposed to other religious and ethnic groups. In this context, to promote cooperation between the international relations sector and the interreligious one can help preserve religious identities from being manipulated by the discourse and narratives of radical nationalism, as a way to avoid the escalation of tensions and conflicts.

– Empower inter-institutional cooperation. Secular and democratic institutions need to work in close partnership with religious leaders and the representatives of faith-based organizations and communities, on a local and national level. This is of paramount importance to ensure security and defend the rule of law against extremist groups. In doing so, phenomena such as the ghettoization, separatism, and marginalization, must be avoided because they can lead to a parallel and dark society, which usually offers a breeding ground for

indoctrination and recruitment especially among the youth, with the pretext of social injustice. The latter certainly must be criticized and tackled, but extremist groups propose violent ideological solutions and alternative regimes that are far worse than the problem they claim to want to solve.

– Develop an interdisciplinary methodology of cooperation. In light of the variety of contexts, there is no unique political or theological solution that can be implemented to prevent and address radical thinking and violent extremism. Therefore, policy-makers and religious leaders are called to integrate their expertise in a holistic and synergic perspective, together developing new skills, common methods, solutions, and languages of communication, to suit every circumstance. This cooperation should not discriminate against any religious identity and community, nor compromise on the principles of freedom and security in every nation for every citizen.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

HIGHLIGHTS

Dr. Ziad Fahed

Professor of Religious Studies, Notre Dame University-Louaize
President, Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR)
Coordinator, Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in the North of Lebanon

In his remarks, Imam Pallavicini mentioned different texts that have been the re-sult of an intra-Muslim coordination or interreligious dialogue, involving theolo-gians, institutions, and religious leaders. However, believers are much quicker to take action than religious leaders. Therefore, supporting the creation of more coalitions and incentives for the engagement of believers is a priority. The more we create spaces for cooperation between believers, the better it is to promote dialogue, as well as to counter radicalization and violent extremism.

If we take the example of Lebanon, the current mothers and fathers are the chil-dren who experienced the civil war. They were raised with an incomplete and dis-torted image of the other, and an incomplete image of diversity, because during the war, they had very limited possibilities to interact with the other, or to un-derstand the other in general. The media played a very negative role in demo-nizing the other, to make it seem evil. These children who have become parents today are currently raising their own children with this incomplete image. It is im-portant to liberate them, and to liberate their children, in order to work on dif-ferent perspectives.

What I am saying about the Lebanese mothers and fathers of today also can be applied to many fathers and mothers all over the world. We need to create this awareness and understanding of the other, but also of the self. I think that the fathers and mothers in the West have an incomplete image not only about the other but also about their own religion sometimes. We thus need to create spaces overseas, platforms, and initiatives involving the grass-root believers, the civil society, in collaboration with the religious leaders. This daily efforts and experience of interaction and dialogue are fundament. A French expression states: "When a tree breaks down, everybody hears, but when forests are growing up, nobody hears". Here, everywhere, I am sure that many forests are growing, although we are only hearing about failures.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini
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I agree about the gap in terms of speed, distinguishing the religious leaders from the believers, and in particular the young believers. The same gap in terms of speed distinguishes those working for peace, and those fomenting disorder. It is fast and easy to destabilize a society, an order, whereas it is much more complex and slower to build peace and cohesion, or to maintain them. We can thus talk of an asymmetric war in terms of speed, and the people seeking instability know that they have an advantage over the others who contribute to the "world of responsibilities". We need to elaborate a science of rhythm to take this aspect into consideration.

Another point needs to be stressed, in order to build this world of responsibility, and reinforce the coalitions and movements involved in peace-building and peaceful coexistence. When we talk about a population, we must insist on the fact that the population must be organized and well-structured, to be more than just a population. It must evolve into a dynamic and efficient civil society. This is the responsibility of the grown-ups, the parents, the institutions, the European Union, and so forth. According to most theories about democracy, the soul of a nation is the civil society, not the mere population. If there is a consolidated civil society, which conveys and promotes valid and ethical values, it can then generate

valid leaders who can represent it, and adequately manage civil society. This requires time and education, but it is a pre-condition for peaceful coexistence. Without a civil society, you can hardly expect a valid management of society. Civil society is both the origin and the goal of ethical politics and ethical management *tout court*. Civil society is necessarily plural and inclusive.

As such, the role of the Muslim and interreligious scholars is limited in scope, resources, and capabilities. They cannot solve the deficiencies of the civil society alone. Their – our – role is to humbly provide some solid references in terms of counter-narratives and adequate interpretation of religious texts, reminding them of the core values conveyed by religion. There is an interesting difference between the 2005 "Common Word" and the 2019 "Human Fraternity Document". The "Common Word" is an Islamic initiative addressed to Christian Theologians. It is an interreligious and inter-theological discussion. While the 2019 "Human Fraternity Document" is blessed and signed by two main spiritual leaders, it is addressed to everyone and its language is more open and accessible to the entire public.

It is true that there is a gap in terms of speed, but the question is not necessarily about speed, it is also the direction and orientation that are given, the *qibla*. The right orientation is toward respect, peace, knowledge, and justice, with the right required rhythm. This is part of the engagement of interreligious dialogue.

Prof. Aicha Haddou
Director of Ta'aruf – Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Centre,
Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

I also agree with the idea of a speed gap between the religious leadership and the believers, and even with the rest of the society. Most of those who are part of the religious leadership today are unable to follow, to keep themselves updated, to be adequately trained in relation to the main transformations of today's societies, and this is a main issue. By contrast, today's youth is highly connected, in particular digitally, and raises very fine contemporary questions, including metaphysical ones. Most of the religious leaders are unable to answer and to meet the expectations and needs of this youth, and they lack the sufficient resources, both material and immaterial, to deal with these questions and with the youth. Fortunately, the religious world has progressively become aware of this issue, at least in Morocco and in some European countries. This is why the training of imams has increasingly incorporated a pluri-disciplinary approach and content, in particular relating to human and social sciences. We have also invested a lot in young leadership, for instance through the creation of the "Réseau des Oulémas relais" ("Network of Relay-Ulemas"). We really need to be connected to the spirit of the times, and the state of mind of youth, in order to be able to interact with them, and answer their doubts and questions. Regarding the theological training, we cannot go ahead with trainings that is disconnected from human sciences.

Dr. Fahed also evoked the lack of a culture of alterity within certain families, and the fact that many parents are unable to transmit an opening to difference and to alterity to their children. It is actually very difficult to influence families and the values that are transmitted within the familial sphere. The channels to get into the families are very limited, apart from the local mosque, the local associations, or maybe television. So, the idea is to try to directly influence the children, although it remains important to try to sensitize the parents. And for this, the school remains the most central and useful channel to educate and influence children, and transmit them the culture of alterity, but also other fundamental values of an inclusive and respectful citizenship. This does not mean that it is an easy task. The school is late, too, and the educational programs are not fully adequate respect to the contemporary challenges and the needs of the youth. Schools also often lack sufficient available resources. The priority is to invest a lot in schools and education, not only in the Muslim world, but also in Europe.

Mr. Andrin Raj

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
Director, Nordic Counter-Terrorism Network

Websites and social media relating to terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al Qaida are particularly informative about the ideas and ideologies underlying radicalization and "jihadism", and thus need to be studied carefully in order to device the proper counter-narratives, especially when Quranic verses are misused to promote the extremist discourse.

To examine websites and social media is also of paramount importance to better figure out the type of communication used by terrorist organizations, with a view to finding effective techniques to counter their propaganda. For instance, there is a difference between Al Qaida's early videos and those of ISIS, as the former feature a limited number of mujahidin, while the latter are replete with fighters to show that everyone can sit in a tank, carry a weapon, or have a car. This is a sign of how ISIS has evolved into a military-style entity, and understanding this and other dynamics in the behavior of terrorist organizations can greatly help develop our own communication approach to address the threat.

How are you working for countering jihadist groups on the ideological ground? Are you actually looking at the content of their narratives disseminated online through videos and posts, particularly when they resort to the Quran?

Prof. Aicha Haddou
Director of Ta'aruf – Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Centre,
Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

The specialists working at the Rabita Mouhamédia of Ulemas Murabita have actually paid much attention to the content promoted by Daesh. They accessed the movement's websites, which is not something that anyone can do. Daesh is extraordinary powerful and professional in terms of communication. The videos produced by the organization to attract the youth are incredibly efficient and professional, including visually, not just in terms of content, and this is a main aspect to address. For instance, Daesh released a sort of add on its website, which is very well-done technologically and aesthetically. We can see a quite ugly bearded man walking in the street of a city, supposedly a city managed by Daesh. I am not criticizing the physical aspect of the man, but I insist on this point because it is probably part of the message. This man is walking together with a very handsome child, with blond hair and blue eyes. If this young boy is the ugly man's child, it comes to mind that the man's spouse is a very handsome woman, corresponding to the European female beauty stereotypes. The subliminal message that Daesh wants to distillate is the following: "come and join us, many handsome women are waiting for you, you can build a family with children, and live a beautiful and happy life". Daesh has gone very far with this kind of subliminal messaging to attract people.

The content is also very important, of course. For what regards my personal experience in studying certain profiles of radicalized men, I have found most of the fundamental information regarding ISIS narratives and communication by interacting with the families. I could also get important information interacting with the young people who went to fight in Syria for motives that are not *jihad* but who, for various reasons, found themselves caught in jihadist networks. The amount and quality of the information I could get in this way is exceptional, and it helped me a lot to understand not only the narratives but also the strategies of Daesh.

For example, on the theological - and psychological - level, Daesh has developed a very effective strategy to attract the youth. It tries to get the youth away from their family, separating them from their relatives, and in particular from their mother. It uses the same tactic as sects. It does so very progressively, without formulating it explicitly. It is a main strategy of the organization precisely because the Prophet Muhammad fiercely banned *jihad* or any kind of fight in

case of disagreement of the mother. The sacred texts are very clear on this condition. Beyond the mother's agreement to go and fight, in Islam, the parents are sacred. Heaven is considered to be under the mother's feet, meaning that access to paradise depends on our relation to our mother, on our love, devotion and obedience to her. How thus to explain the high number of young people who joined *jihad* without their mother's agreement? It is precisely because Daesh makes a great effort to make the young people think that the family's and mother's approval is not necessary. The organization does thorough and continuous brainwashing on this particular question, and I could notice it when I spoke to the families and to the young people who came back from Syria. The discourse of Daesh is basically the following: "Be careful, your mother will surely prevent you from going to *jihad*, and condemn your project. But it is precisely because you love and respect your mother that you have to join us, in order to save your mother's soul. Your mother lives in Europe, in a corrupt country, or in Morocco, where Islam is not well practiced and applied. As a consequence, your mother does not know what is the right Islam, she is unaware of this. She risks to go to hell because she does not practice the true Islam. If you engage in *jihad*, not only you will access Paradise, but you will also save your mother's soul, as well as the soul of 73 members of your family". This is confirmed by the mothers who could speak to their sons in Syria, telling them to come back, telling them that they disapproved of their choice. The main motivation stressed by the young men was saving their mother's soul.

As you can notice, movements such as Daesh methodologically divert the Islamic content, and it is very effectively done. They also invest a lot in communication and psychological manipulation. Many young people who left Morocco for jihadist fronts were previously living in slums. They were afraid of committing suicide because suicide is absolutely forbidden in Islam. But going to *jihad* appears to them as a "halal" suicide, a process of "halalization" of suicide as narrated and presented by Daesh. The organization explains that the jihadists who die in *jihad* go to paradise, where they have women waiting for them, and dying in *jihad* also enables them to save their mother and 73 relatives. Daesh founds its propaganda on Islamic texts which are instrumentalized and diverted from their true meaning.

The communication of Daesh not only plays on theological and psychological grounds, since it also connects to material needs. The organization reassures the jihadists about the concrete needs of their family. It assures that it will materially take care of their family if they die fighting. I met young people who have been told by Daesh that their family would be granted 4,000 dirhams if they die. These

young people, even in Europe, who face identity and psychological issues and who consider that they have no future are sensitive to this argument.

There is the need to deconstruct all the narratives and communication of Daesh. Apart from the interviews and interactions with the families, we also use the internet a lot to study the narratives and communication of Daesh, and to deconstruct and counter them. But such work is more efficient if there is concrete work done on the ground as well. I would like here to pay a tribute to the mothers of jihadists, who are not recognized by the official institutions despite the extraordinary work they have been doing for peace. These women are stigmatized because their sons are or were jihadists. Nevertheless, they have done a lot to save other young people and have saved many of them. These women intervene in jails, schools, and other sensitive contexts.

I met three women living in Belgium and in the Netherlands, who addressed a letter to Daesh via Facebook, a bit like the "Letter to Al Baghdadi", but this was sent directly to the organization. The text said: "You will not take our children anymore. We, mothers, will be here. We have been unable to save our own children, but we will save all the others". Three hours later, Daesh answered them. This means that those in the organization have been troubled somehow. Of course, Daesh answered by denigrating these mothers, but it reacted, and this is really interesting. These women need to be recognized and congratulated for the work they are doing daily, because they contribute to the public interest.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini
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To counter radicalism and elaborate alternative narratives, two approaches at least appear to be necessary and relevant. First, we need to implement an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional methodology. We are involved in Italy, in Europe, and at a transatlantic level in a consultation process in which the skills of all the partners interact. Everyone has his own strategies, experience, and identity, but we have a common enemy. Sharing this experience provides the theologian

or the religious leader with a better awareness of how the institutions, the military, the intelligence, and the media can and should work together.

To counter radicalization and provide counter narratives, we need to spread the correct interpretations of certain verses of the Quran that are abused and de-contextualized. This has been done. However, we should be careful of not play-ing the game of the extremists, who are claiming a legitimacy on the interpretation of Islam, and who spread a competition about who is the most knowledgeable and reliable over the Quranic interpretation, trying to appear as the purest interpreters. This is why, although the consultation process I am part of is doing this work of methodic interpretation and is seeking to spread it, it is reluctant to do it in the main media. It tries to find the best moment and the best channels to do it, not to follow the provocation of extremist groups.

These views and interpretations should be disseminated directly to the communi-ties, which have different characteristics depending on where they are located, and thus we must also adapt to the context. The imams or religious leaders can play this role, through meetings, courses, preaching, clarifying what has been the Muslim civilization for more than fourteen centuries, providing a methodic and holistic in-terpretation of the sacred texts, mobilizing theology, spirituality, jurisprudence, iden-tifying what is extremist, radical, violent. In such a way, we can establish a clear distinction between what is moderate and right Islam, and what is wrong and ex-treme. It is part of what I call the strategy of isolation and differentiation. It is spread-ing the view that extremism is not part of any Islamic traditional honest teaching.

The second approach is to consider the aspects that are not necessarily related to theology and ideology, although they remain important aspects to acknowledge. The radicalization of the youth is not a direct result of the use or misuse of Quranic verses by extremist organizations. These verses are just used instrumentally. The true poison does not come from the misinterpretation of the Quran, but from the culture of violence, war games, all this aesthetic which actually participates in the brainwashing done by ISIS. Basically, a great part of the communication of ISIS uses videos depicting the jihadists as super powerful heroes, in a Hollywood or video-game like scenario. We have to say to the youth that ISIS communication is a false emotional communication, that none will become a hero if he goes to Syria, and that no heaven or retribution is waiting for you if you kill yourself or someone else. It is really essential to deconstruct the emotional communication and brainwashing.

Dr. Elie Al Hindy
Executive Director, Adyan Foundation

Although we have focused a lot on Islam, it is important to observe that radical thinking and violent extremism does not pertain to the Islamic world and the MENA region, but is present in all religions and areas. Besides, it is not only or necessarily linked with religions, but it can also affect other domains. It means that we have to consider all the facets, factors and sources of extremism and radicalism, to understand the contemporary evolutions, and be able to counter radicalism including in its religious version.

We also have to be critical regarding certain assumptions or practices of interreligious dialogue, in particular between or within monotheistic religions. It is actually easier to speak about interreligious dialogue or cooperation between the Abrahamic religions, than to incorporate religions which are not monotheistic in this dialogue and be more inclusive in terms of religious pluralism.

I also prefer to use the term "common living" or "living together" ("vivre ensemble"), rather than "tolerance", which suggests a sort of constraint, or the term "coexistence" which supposes that we should exist one next to each other, but with limited interactions and sharing. "Living together" means sharing a same life experience in a same place, on a daily basis, and this is what creates a natural dialogue, impacts and transform the people on a personal and social level.

Mr. Ahmeddahir Hussein Osman

Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, Federal Republic of Somalia

The issues discussed here echo the challenges faced by the Somali authorities. During and after the Somalian civil war, which started in 1991, extremist movements claiming their belonging to Islam have proliferated. The most prominent one is Al Shabaab, linked to Al Qaida, which remains very active, and who is fighting the Somali government but also foreign ones, such as Kenya. The Somalian government as well as the African Union are working to eradicate the movement, both physically and ideologically. The Somalian government has a long experience in the field of counter-terrorism. It has acquired a relevant knowledge of the tactics and strategies of the movement, for example in the way in which it radicalizes and recruits the youth. Of course, they take profit from the weak economy and target people living in a very precarious socio-economic situations and with mental disorder too.

Al Shabaab mobilizes views that clearly misinterpret Islam, and establish a dichotomy between the movement, which allegedly represent the righteous Islam, and the Somali authorities, depicted as infidels. Al Shabaab pushes its recruits to kill those working for the government, promising them a reward in heaven. This is why the Somali government is aware that the army and security forces alone are not sufficient to defeat Al Shabaab and any extremist group. It must win the hearts and minds of the community, countering the ideology and the wrong messages of the extremists, starting from the teaching of the Quran. Actually, Al Qaida and Al Shabaab have been able to spread their ideology in numerous Quranic schools.

Therefore, *sharia* should be adequately explained, and awareness of the variety of interpretative methods and trends should be raised. Three months ago, Al Shabaab released a video accusing the Somalian government, the European Union, and the U.S. of being infidels and enemy of Islam. The Somalian authorities, with the help of Islamic scholars and imams, are now elaborating in a letter an adequate reply to the points raised by Al Shabaab, so as to show the community to what extent the movement is misusing Islam. However, the mobilization of Muslim scholars against Islamic extremism should be more intense and more structured in international networks of cooperation. Islamic scholars and imams all around the world should unite and highlight the fact that Al Qaida or other such movements are absolutely not part of Islam. We should not even call them "Islamists", but find another name or category to name them, to prevent anyone from thinking that they have any religious legitimacy, relevance or connection to Islam. It could be an adequate way to cut the roots of pseudo-religious extremism.

Beyond the fight against such extremist movements, the Somalian authorities should also work further in protecting the rights of religious minorities, and demonstrate more support in their favor. There is indeed a small Christian community in Somalia which is quite vulnerable. We have to insist on the fact that the core concept and meaning of Islam is peace, and that Islam vouches for peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. This is the exact contrary of what is taught and practiced by Al Shabaab and Al Qaida, which instead call for violent *jihad* against the alleged infidels. So, we need to go back to our genuine history and restore the knowledge of Islam, and to think about how people could live together peacefully.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini
President, Islamic Religious Community of Italy (COREIS)
Ambassador for Dialogue among Civilizations,
Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO)

If a state constitution mentions *sharia* (although the interpretations of *sharia* vary a lot), the application of *sharia* implies to provide equal rights for all believers within the fold of the Abrahamic religions. There is indeed some embarrassment or debate regarding other believers, such as Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'i. So, there is the need for new *fatwas* on the approach to be adopted toward

the believers of non-Abrahamic religions, if one wants to connect the rights of such communities to Islamic texts. There is a policy debate among Islamic scholars and authorities on this matter. Should we be strict in interpreting and applying the *sharia*, saying for instance that the rights of the faithful of non-Abrahamic religions are not incorporated in the set of rights and principles stated in the Quran? This in order to maintain what could seem a theological coherence. Or should we adopt another stance, elaborating new interpretative paradigms that go beyond what the Quranic doctrine acknowledges as "communities"? Should we rather refer to the core notion of respect and peace, also central in the Quran, and state clearly that equal dignity and citizenship should be provided to all? It is a provocative question, but a clarification is needed. And although this alternative approach is for the moment sustained by a minority of scholars and religious leaders, it is an orientation that should be granted more visibility, and to which we should dedicate much efforts in the future.

THIRD SESSION

HOW TO FOSTER RECONCILIATION AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

The Third Session of the Study Seminar focused on "How to Foster Reconciliation and Peaceful Coexistence". The two keynote speakers – Dr. Elie Abouaoun, Senior Fellow at the Religion & Security Council (RSC) and Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace; Hon. Pascale Isho Warda, RSC Senior Fellow, President of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, and Former Minister for Migration and the Displaced, Iraqi Interim Government – shared their views on the reasons for the polarization in terms of political, confessional, and ethnic identities that have long been preventing common living in local societies. The heaviest consequences of conflicts, uprisings, humanitarian predicament, and violent extremism, have been paid oftentimes by minority communities, while the scenario is further compounded by bad governance and corruption, which strongly contribute to undermine the legitimacy of institutions and state-building processes. This calls for renewed efforts to develop effective initiatives and programs aimed at fostering peace and reconciliation in the MENA Region, with the support of the international community. The proceedings were introduced and moderated by Ms. Shireen Al Mashaqba, RSC Senior Fellow and Head of the Cultural Relations Section, Hashemite University of Jordan.

"FOOD FOR THOUGHT" ON RELIGION, IDENTITY-POLITICS, AND GOVERNANCE

Dr. Elie Abouaoun
Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

The question about how to foster reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in the MENA region is definitely a very complex one, and with my answer I will try to offer some "food for thought", first addressing a number of regional cross-cutting issues and then the cases of four countries: Libya, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq. This will by no means be a comprehensive analysis, but it will shed light on the dynamics that have led over time to the current predicament in the area, highlighting the role played by the "religious factor" and identity-based politics, as well as some possible solutions to improve good governance and open a new era for MENA people and communities.

Historical Overview

Among the sources of warfare and instability in the MENA region, there is a misconception of the notion of "inclusivity" concerning the sub-national identities, religious as well as ethnic ones. The roots of this misconception predate the Ottomans' era, but it is during the six hundred years of their empire that the divisions we still see today started to take concrete shape, as a consequence of their "divide and rule" strategy. To ensure their control over a large territory with a very

diverse demographics, Ottomans tampered with the sub-national identities, similarly to other empires throughout history. These sub-national identities were mostly religious and sectarian, but in some parts of North Africa also ethnic and linguistic in nature.

Immediately after the end of the First World War, the control of the MENA region was taken by France and Britain, which rushed to build nation states inspired from their domestic model of governance. Regardless of whether their intentions were good or bad, history proved their actions were a mistake.

The two mandatory powers adopted a top-down approach, dealing only with the elites of the newly born states, empowering religious leaders and the most educated sectors of the society within an institutional framework that envisaged a parliament, a prime minister, a president of the Republic, and arrangements typical of the Western democratic models. In doing so, however, they disregarded the complexity of the local context and did not succeed in involving the bulk of the population in the building process of viable nation states. As a result, peaceful coexistence and stability were not destined to be long-lasting achievements.

Subsequently, two major ideologies spread across the region: Pan-Arab Nationalism and Political Islam. Both emerged as a reaction to the presence of France and Britain, although they were also used by the latter in some instances to assert their influence and in the power competition between them. In 1948, the creation of the state of Israel was followed by intense conflicts that involved not only the Palestinians, but most of the neighboring countries, causing an unprecedented polarization that was also emotional and not only political.

These conflicts catalyzed political changes that led, in the 50s and the 60s, to the fall of the monarchies and the rise of republics in Egypt and Iraq. These new republics, however, devolved soon into dictatorships, which sided with the Soviet Union in the Cold War similarly to the regime in Syria. On the other hand, the West used to back the monarchies of the Gulf, mostly autocratic as well, in return for their policy of non-engagement with Moscow.

In the 70s and 80s, unfortunately the West saw "jihadism" as a useful tool to counter the Soviet expansion, as was the case in Iran with Khomeini and with Afghanistan's jihadists after Moscow's invasion. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Afghanistan was the first country to be targeted and then a regime change took

place in Iraq, with consequences that continue to affect the country today.

The so-called "Arab Spring" in 2011 brought along the failure of the new parliamentary democracies, along with deeper social inequalities and ever more violence, which are the hallmark of the MENA region nowadays. In many cases, violence is justified as a legitimate means to achieve political goals also at the grassroots level by ordinary citizens. The political arena is characterized by unlimited competition and zero-sum games. Compromise and negotiation are almost absent from the local political culture, and the widening of the "vertical" divisions within each country is increasing the risk of the outbreak of new violent internal conflicts. Endemic corruption, ineffective governance, and outdated or absent social contracts are common characteristics of most countries of the region.

Case Studies

- Tunisia

In 2013, Tunisia witnessed a major national dialogue which proved to be a successful endeavor to bridge the gap between the Islamist and the secular constituents of Tunisia. Indeed, this process helped mitigate the domestic disputes and prevent the country from sliding into political violence and civil war. However, the temporary power-sharing system which resulted from the national dialogue lasted too long, leading to dysfunctional institutions and a failed system. The Parliament was stuck in a permanent stalemate, and could not exercise the legislative power effectively. As a consequence, no measure was approved to address the needs of the citizens, seriously affected by the economic crisis and deteriorating social conditions.

All this engendered the rejection of the political establishment by the population – a common outcome of the "Arab Spring "wave of protests across the MENA region –, and was the main factor triggering the popular support that allowed the current President Kais Saied to come to power through democratic elections and not by force. Obviously, there were unrealistic expectations from the revolution and the ensuing political changes. This applies to Tunisia, but also to Libya, Syria, and other countries in the region, where it was widely believed that the shift from dictatorship to democracy would have carried with it a substantial improvement of the socio-economic conditions.

Tunisia's economic predicament is becoming worse and worse day by day, with an increasing divide between the coastal and the interior areas, which has been inherited from the past – dating back to the times of Habib Bourguiba, the first President after Tunisia's independence – and was not addressed by the post-2011 governments.

- Iraq

One of the misconceptions about Iraq is that radicalism started after 2003, although it was ignited before since the early '90s by Saddam Hussein's "Faith Campaign", which was the root of what happened after the military intervention of the United States. To be sure, the U.S. mismanagement of the post-Saddam Iraq enabled radicalism to flourish. In particular, the chaotic and arbitrary de-Baathification process excluded a lot of Sunnis not only from the bureaucracy, but also from the political process and practice, and this was exploited by some of the extremist groups. As they say in Iraq, the "marriage" between Al Douri and Al Dhari took place: Izzat Al Douri was one of Saddam's vice presidents, who managed not to be captured by the U.S. forces and led the insurgency, while Harith Al Dhari used to be the Chairman of the Association of Muslim Scholars and a religious extremist leader.

The "marriage" consisted in the manipulation of religion by a number of former cadres of the Baath party, both military and civilians, to fuel terrorism in the country, first Al Qaida and then ISIS. Many of those who were leading the operations of the two terrorist organizations were the same figures hailing from the Baath party.

After the liberation of the territories held by ISIS, radicalism has continued to be a predominant factor in the country in a different form, with the pro-Iranian Shiite militias known as Popular Mobilization Forces. Owing to Iran's support, these armed groups are in control of all the political, economic, cultural, and social processes in Iraq, both directly or indirectly.

In this context, the most vulnerable communities are the minority groups, whether religious or ethnic, such as Christians and Yazidis, which are still suffering from discrimination. In the past, during the time of dictatorship and of the Baathist leftist ideology, they had to choose, for instance, between being a good Christian or a good Iraqi, as it was not possible to be both. Today, they are not granted

equal citizenship as Iraqis because they are not Muslims. This shows the lack of inclusion of sub-national identities, which are considered not compatible with the national one, although there should be no competition between them. This is one of the major issues to be addressed nowadays in Iraq and in other countries of the MENA region.

- Libya

Theoretically, in pre-2011 Libya, the awkward inverted pyramid model fashioned by Muammar Gaddafi was supposed to give more power to the people, but in reality that was never the case. The actual system had one person on the top of the pyramid, and then fragmented and dispersed state-run entities focused on community services. In so doing, Gaddafi created a vacuum between the administrative level and the top political decision-making one, perhaps intentionally to make sure that there would have been no competition between the two. In addition, Gaddafi used to buy the loyalty of ethnic and linguistic groups, in order to coopt them. As a result, Libya was ruled by an authoritarian regime, which increased the level of regionalism and social inequalities, instead of at least reducing them as promised.

In post-2011 Libya, the international community made the usual mistake to rush the elections and the introduction of a constitution, without thinking about the social contract to define the basis of the living together. Do they want to partition the country? Do they want a federal or a centralized system? None of these defining questions was answered. But elections were organized both in 2012 and 2014, which paved the way for the division of the country and the civil war.

Since then, Libya has two governments that compete with each other for the energy resources, which are the main driver of the domestic conflicts. In this context, the intra-EU rivalries and the regional interferences only exacerbated the situation.

- Lebanon

As a state, Lebanon is built on a power sharing system that reflects the variety of its strong sub-national identities of religious nature. For many, this is the source of all the problems of the country (jokingly, even including traffic jams). However, I believe that this is an issue that can be addressed, and it can be done by

affirming the complementarity, on the one hand, between the sub-national identities, discarding once and for all the idea that they can only compete with each other; on the other hand, between the sub-national identities and the Lebanese national identity. This complementarity would ensure that the power sharing system does not devolve into sectarianism.

Similarly, it is a misconception to believe that the checks and balances between confessions in the Constitution are alone hindering the democratic governance. The issue is not about the constitutional guarantees themselves, but about the use you make of them.

Needless to say, the power sharing system and the constitutional guarantees have been misused and manipulated by most of the Lebanese political leaders, who have been thriving on the promotion of the sectarian competition for a long time. That is why the system proved to be dysfunctional and inefficient, fueling corruption across both the public and private sector to an extent that it has become a social norm.

Policy Recommendations

As a way forward to reach stability, reconciliation, and peace in the MENA region, the following areas of engagement are suggested:

– Establish the idea of complementarity between national and sub-national identities, and promote inclusive citizenship and governance, leading to sustainable social contracts;

– Restore trust in the political system. People in MENA countries have lost faith in political leaders and entities, developing a closer affinity with individual leaders coming outside the party system. This is a dangerous development, which could open the way to authoritarianism. Priority must be given to structural economic and social reforms. If people continue to live with social and economic inequalities, it is hard to convince them that they need to think about the social contract, governance, and political issues. The trust issue also involves the religious leaders and institutions, which are a significant component of the fabric of MENA countries and have also been a source of dissatisfaction;

– Acknowledge the relevance of the public service on a local level, distinguish it

from the public service on a national level. This would help prevent the creation of political vacuums, which the authoritarian regimes usually try to create by blurring the line between what is local and what is national, in order for them to put the former under their control;

– Promote a long-term endeavor to mainstream the concept and the values of accountability, which are absent from the basic culture in MENA countries. This involves not only the institutions and politics, but also the civilian organizations and single individuals;

– Empower the intellectual resources of the region, using local expertise to start generating the solutions to the problems that keep affecting the MENA countries, including the achievement of a new peace and security architecture;

– Enhance the partnership with the Western countries, Europe, and the United States in particular, based less on financial interests and more on the promotion of human rights and democratic values.

SECTARIANISM AND THE PREDICAMENT OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAQ

Hon. Pascale Isho Warda

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
President, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization
Former Minister for Migration and the Displaced, Iraqi Interim Government

Throughout its history, Iraq has witnessed a long series of ethno-religious massacres and conflicts, even before its creation (1921) and independence (1932), until the latest genocidal attempt by ISIS during the occupation of Mosul, the Nineveh Plane, and Sinjar (2014-2017). Sectarian violence and extremism targeted especially Christians (Syriacs, Chaldeans, Armenians), the Yazidis, the Sabian Mandaeans, and other minorities, with the aim of erasing their civilization and identity, although they are indigenous to the Iraqi territory. Against this backdrop, properly assessing the current Iraqi context can help identify the way forward to attain the long-awaited peace and reconciliation in the country.

The Post-Saddam Era

After the fall of Saddam Hussein (2003), sectarian violence and extremism marked the revival of the strife between Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis, which resulted in a large number of deaths and major destruction across the country, including religious sites. The implementation of the so-called "de-Baathification" law was sometimes

the source of grievous injustices, which affected especially the Sunni community, who used to be the dominant power during the Baathist dictatorship.

On top of that, ISIS caused ever more deaths, destruction, displacement of people, and humanitarian tragedies. All the Christian churches in Mosul were razed to the ground, similarly to the crimes committed by Saddam Hussein's regime in the Christian villages of the north in 1988 while executing the "Anfal" genocidal campaign, which was mainly directed against the Kurds (between 50,000 to 100,000 victims) but suppressed other minorities as well.

Over the last 20 years, more than one million Iraqi Christians were forced to flee the country according to the official statistics. Less than 500,000 are left, and many of them still cannot return to their homes in Mosul, similarly to what is happening to the Yazidis in Sinjar. A total of 3 million Christians were forced to abandon the country since the 60s of the last century, and are now scattered in different places around the world.

Deep wounds keep bleeding in the hearts and minds of those who are alive today and fight for justice and the respect for human rights, first and foremost religious freedom. This fight unites all the Iraqi people who strive to build a better future, irrespective of their religion or ethnicity. The new generations do not deserve to suffer from the scourge of terrorism, nor to be subjected to the hegemony of sectarian militias and political parties.

How Sectarianism Looks

The origins of Iraq's heterogeneity are in part geographical. The fertile lands along the Tigris and Euphrates became home to most of the population, which developed different customs and traditions from the inhabitants of other areas over the centuries. In addition, the presence of many religious confessions and ethnicities greatly contributed to the diversity of the social and cultural fabric, but to date the country has yet to find effective solutions to ensure harmonious relations and peaceful coexistence between the different groups.

After the independence and the establishment of the Republic, all the successive governments failed in this respect, so much so that the Iraqis now believe that the authority in charge of the country, no matter who it is and how it came to power, is not better than the previous one, which the people had already rejected.

The governments that followed the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship are not an exception, since they are based on institutionalized sectarianism, both from a religious and ethnic standpoint, as sanctioned by the Constitution itself. In the political sphere, sectarianism keeps influencing governmental choices and the distribution of power in favor of the majority and to the detriment of minorities. Sectarianism has spawned a number of by-products so far, such as vote rigging during elections, the growing internal corruption in the public administration, and the disenfranchisement of citizens toward politics and politicians. Each party seeks to advance the narrow interests of the sectarian constituency it represents, according to a zero-sum competition where the goal is to subjugate the state policies to its own sectarian agenda, regardless of the common good. This is a major source of domestic tensions, which are always on the verge of new outbreaks of violence.

The political process is not able to lead to the adoption of structural measures to boost the economic development of Iraq. As a result, despite the country's huge wealth in terms of energy resources, 40 percent of the population live below the poverty line, unemployment remains rampant, especially among the youth, services and infrastructures are absent. The living conditions of families have drastically deteriorated, and so did the health system. The sick, homeless, and displaced people have increased significantly. The weakness of the means to ensure social control and public order gave way to various forms of violence, delinquency, and crime. Prisons are more and more crowded.

Another source of violence and extremism is the deterioration of the educational level, which is caused by the lack of proper school buildings and facilities. Oftentimes, there are more than 50 students per class. About 1000 schools are made of mud or straw, or in other cases the lessons are given in tents or caravans. They lack clean water and sanitary toilets, as well as laboratories, libraries, and technical equipment. The level of the training for teachers is worsening, while the level of violence in schools keeps rising.

Religious Minorities and the Lack of Religious Freedom

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood". Therefore, we are all born with the right to freedom, including

freedom of religion. However, this is still not the case in Iraq, where there is freedom of worship, but not religious freedom. The two are different things. For instance, Article 26 of the Iraqi National Identity Law introduced in 2016 impose on minors from non-Muslim minorities to convert to Islam if one of their parents becomes Muslim, thus restricting their capacity to take decisions about their own religious belief. Furthermore, the right to embrace another religion is granted only to non-Muslims when they intend to convert to Islam. Anything else is deemed a crime (apostasy), even punishable by death. As a consequence of the lack of legal protection for minority religions, most Christian and Yazidi Iraqis have been persecuted and forced to live in diaspora, with violence and genocidal events diminishing their presence in the country. Most of Muslim children are mistaught their religion from an early age to a degree that they end up insulting and condemning their classmates as "infidels" if they are Christians and Yazidis.

Most of the countries in the MENA region lack the basic concepts of justice and equality, as mechanisms to reject religious and ethnic discrimination. This is a cultural issue, which needs to be addressed through a major effort in the educational field, in order to develop and spread the culture of respect for other religions. To invest in human capabilities is the way forward to raise awareness of religious freedom among young men and women, who will become the citizens and the leaders of tomorrow. All Iraqis must feel safe and have their human rights duly protected in their country.

In March 2021, the landmark visit of Pope Francis to Iraq was seen as a hope for change. The reaction of the Iraqi people was unique, since they discovered a new reality which was reflected in the words of the Pope, who said "you are all brothers", asking for "human fraternity", rather than war and sectarianism. All of this bears witness to the need for the Iraqis to work together as human beings directed toward interreligious dialogue, a peaceful society, and cooperation for the common good.

The Support of the International Community

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is valid in any circumstance. This means that it is possible to preserve religious freedom, while still establishing long-term peace and stability in a society, such as the Iraqi one. The Iraqi authorities are thus called to make the necessary legislative changes and implement concrete policies to stop all forms of abuse, violence, and discrimination against religious and

ethnic minorities, ensuring the respect for human rights on a local and national level.

To fulfil this task, the "National Reconciliation Committee", acting under the Higher Committee for Coexistence and Community Peace, was established in 2017, soon after the liberation of the country from ISIS, and a number of initiatives aimed at protecting human rights and promoting peaceful coexistence were in fact carried out. However, this process suffered a major setback in 2019, due to the violent repression of the demonstrations led by the civil society and the youth. Since then, no substantial progress has been made to address the issue underlying the creation of the "National Reconciliation Committee", especially as far as the religious minorities are concerned.

The body is entrusted with "the return of the displaced to their homes", and with "resolving security, clan, and service problems that hinder it", but there are still thousands of Christian and Yazidi Iraqis who are not able to go back to Mosul and other places in the Nineveh plane they had to flee from during the plague of ISIS occupation. In addition, sectarianism, also prompted by foreign interferences, continues to be the hallmark and the driving force of the political process, preventing the possibility to concretely "work to establish a culture of dialogue, tolerance, respect for other opinions, diversity in all its forms, respect for the law and for all values that support peaceful coexistence", as expressed in the mission statement of the "National Reconciliation Committee".

This calls for a renewed effort by the international community to support Iraq in its quest for peace and security. The role of the international community has been fundamental so far, both in making the liberation from ISIS possible and in providing humanitarian aid and a substantial help in the reconstruction of what was destroyed during the war. Now, further support is needed in favor of those organizations of the civil society and faith-based actors striving to promote education and awareness about dialogue, respect for human rights, and religious freedom.

At the same time, from a security perspective, Iraq needs to strengthen its relations with NATO and NATO member states to ensure the training of the Iraqi military and police forces. This will play a key role in advancing the security and stability necessary to allow a culture of peace, reconciliation, and living together to take root and flourish across the country.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

HIGHLIGHTS

Dr. Majeda Omar
Associate Professor, University of Jordan
Former Director, Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies

Thank you, Ms. Warda, for your very enlightening reflection about the Iraqi situation. From your experience and knowledge, do you think that there have been missed opportunities, in the last decades, that could have changed the course of the events, or particular failed attempts? Is there any lesson learnt from this very intense period?

Hon. Pascale Isho Warda
Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
President, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization
Former Minister for Migration and the Displaced, Iraqi Interim Government

In such a chaotic situation, it is uneasy to distinguish the bad from the good, and to see the good side of things. In addition to what has been said, we must stress the fact that all these years of conflict and chaos have resulted in a huge destruction of infrastructures and systems. Any reconstruction, including a material one, will require much time. We need to rebuild with everyone's

help, not alone. What is sure is that rebuilding must be done in a democratic fashion.

Brig. Gen. Davide Re
Director of the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub,
Allied Joint Force Command Naples

Talking about international cooperation with Iraq, I would like to stress that NATO fully cooperates with Iraq. However, there is currently a difficulty in fully cooperating because of the institutional crisis Iraq has been going through for several months. The new parliament is still to be elected, for instance. My NATO colleagues involved in the educational training mission in Iraq need to interact closely with the Iraqi institutions and leaders. Institutional crises hamper the efficacy of cooperation, as well as the conditions for a brighter future in the country. Do you see any timeline to get institutions that can adequately welcome and manage international cooperation?

Hon. Pascale Isho Warda
Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
President, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization
Former Minister for Migration and the Displaced, Iraqi Interim Government

Yes, there is this possibility in some ministries, where there is readiness to change the mindset and be open for more international cooperation. This can be discussed with the authorities in charge.

Dr. Elie Abouaoun
Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

To answer the political dimension of the question, the timeline to form a government in Iraq depends on an intra Shiite consensus, and so far the two main Shiites coalitions did not come to an agreement about how to deal with it.

The Iranians have the capacity technically to force solutions, but they have not done it yet. However, their priority is to make sure that the Shiites do not come divided to the parliament, in order to have one Shiite parliamentary block to rely on, as it has always happened until now. It is a strategic choice, in order to have more options to cope with the possible developments of the situation. Moreover, the Iranians are waiting for the outcome of Vienna discussions.

Once these two elements are clear, then the Iranians might decide on a different course of action and somehow force solutions, in a cesarean style agreement. Therefore, it is very hard to predict the timeline now. However, as Hon. Warda said, the main constituents in any Iraqi government, with the exception of the Popular Mobilization Forces, would be in favor of partnerships with the international community, including NATO and other organizations to deal with counter-terrorism.

Dr. Michael Driessen
Associate Professor, John Cabot University

Dr. Abouaoun, we have been talking about adopting an engagement approach with religious leaders, and so I was wondering how you see their engagement in the countries you addressed during your presentation. Maybe you can suggest practices of good engagement with religious leaders, as a way to respond to the culture of corruption that is widespread in the region.

Dr. Elie Abouaoun
Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

There are a lot of good religious leaders, who are trying within their own institutions to promote the culture of anticorruption. The problem is that the overall context is not allowing for these practices to be highlighted sufficiently enough for the public opinion to see them.

Therefore, one particular line of effort could be to highlight the benefit that these practices can have on the population, since corruption is becoming kind of a social norm, not only in Lebanon but in Iraq, Tunisia and in other countries of the MENA region. People need to understand that with less corruption, they can also preserve their interests. There is a lack of evidence on how less corruption actually can be more beneficial to the population.

Mr. Andrin Raj

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)

Director, Nordic Counter-Terrorism Network

I would like to highlight Dr. Abouaoun's comments on the Middle East. The Scandinavian region has focused primarily on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), and Nordic policy-makers could play a primary role in supporting your work, especially because they promote and implement core values such as gender equality and youth inclusiveness, in addition to PVE.

Dr. Elie Abouaoun

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)

Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

I thank you for this useful suggestion. I am aware that part of the thinking is not going in that direction. "Soft" approaches are very much needed to complement the "hard" ones, but are usually undervalued and the level of investment is not proportionate.

Dr. Elie Al Hindy

Executive Director, Adyan Foundation

As for Iraqi politics, how do you think that the passing of Ali Al Sistani and Ali Khamenei, two old major and influential leaders, will influence religion and politics in the country and the broader region? Do we know who might succeed them?

Dr. Elie Abouaoun

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)

Former Director of North Africa Programs & Regional Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

The two cases are considerably different. In the case of Sistani, succession would involve intense discussions and bargaining between major and influential stakeholders in Najaf, which will influence the outcome of the succession. One should keep in mind, however, that Sistani's position as Grand Marja'eyah does not

exist formally. It has been "gained" by Sistani through time, thanks to the accumulation of moral capital which earned him the support of a great number of people among the Shiites. Nothing by law or in any religious text states that this position is the most influential one. We cannot talk thus of an institutional succession. After his death, one of the religious leaders currently in Najaf might actually become Sistani's successor and play the same role he has been playing until today. However, it is hard to make predictions at this stage. What appears probable is that with Sistani's death, there is a risk that the central role of Najaf will decline if another Grand Marja'eyah figure does not emerge.

In Iran, the situation is quite different. Khamenei's position is completely institutionalized. It is probable that Khamenei has already chosen his successor. The question is whether the other elements of the regime will accept his choice. The most reliable information from Iran is that Raissi, the current president, has been the one identified by Khamenei as his successor. However, Raissi does not benefit from the same political capital and influence of Khamenei. Here, too, it is difficult to formulate predictions.

Dr. Ziad Fahed
Full Professor, Notre Dame University-Louaize
President, Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation
Coordinator, Sustainable Network of Religious Leaders in Tripoli and North Lebanon

I have a question for Dr. Abouaoun. You have mentioned the importance of reconciliation. I would like to know more about your view of reconciliation, and how you define and perceive it.

Dr. Elie Abouaoun
Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
Director of North Africa Programs & MENA Hub, U.S. Institute of Peace

I do not think that there is one single definition of reconciliation. What I will formulate is based on my personal practical experience. Reconciliation involves dealing with the past and laying the foundations for a sustainable peace in the future. In other words, it is a junction between acknowledging what happened in the past in terms of violence between two or more groups, and laying the foundations for a peaceful future. Should every reconciliation include elements of sustainable peace? I think it should, from an ideal and theoretical point of view. However, from a concrete perspective, it is not always the case. This is why, in our concrete practice, we accept that two conflicting parties can agree on some temporary arrangement, which can last one, two or three years. Then, during this period of time, we try to build trust between the parties in order to work on a much broader framework of reconciliation. In my view, therefore, reconciliation is an incremental and gradual process. It is only *a posteriori* that you can say "now we have reached reconciliation".

One must keep in mind that social reconciliation can be reversible, as I have seen in my experience. In many areas, like in Southern Arabia or Iraq, we spend much time working on reconciliation and, at a certain moment, when we think that we have reached a consolidated level of reconciliation between the two parties, something happens in the country and we go ten steps backward. Since reconciliation is reversible, it needs to be coupled with many other elements to consolidate sustainability, in order to avoid that contextual fluctuations could hamper the whole process.

CONCLUSION

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS ON "RELIGION, PEACE, AND SECURITY IN THE MENA REGION"

Mr. Emiliano Stornelli – Dr. Sihem Djebbi[*]

The insights and recommendations shared by the keynote speakers and discussants throughout the Study Seminar point to a greater integration of the role of religions in the international security strategies focused on crisis management, conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict stabilization in the MENA region. Based on the proceedings, a set of general strategic takeaways can be put forward concerning each of the main areas of interest that have been dealt with (interreligious dialogue, countering radicalization and violent extremism, fostering reconciliation and peaceful coexistence), complemented by transversal action lines and conclusive elements.

Interreligious Dialogue

In a context where religious identities and traditions are misused to fuel inter-state warfare and geopolitical rivalries, domestic strife and tensions, a strategy based on a truly comprehensive approach needs to take into consideration the transformational capacities of interreligious dialogue in enabling de-escalation and de-confliction, reconciliation and cooperation. By engaging the stakeholders from different religious groups, interreligious dialogue can provide a neutral space for the encounter between representatives of the conflicting parties, contributing to:

– Defuse tensions, facilitate mutual understanding, and create bonds based on trust and respect, thus paving the way to peaceful settlements;

– Prevent theological or doctrinal differences, as well as historical and politico-ideological fault lines, from being translated into sectarian postures and violent extremism;

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– Further living together and social cohesion, inclusive citizenship and the respect for human rights, mutual aid and cooperation for the common good, also for the benefit of the most vulnerable categories (religious and ethnic minorities, youth, women, refugees and displaced persons).

Given their position and role, religious leaders are key players to initiate an interreligious dialogue process and to ensure its sustainability, including through the creation of cooperation platforms between them.

At the same time, the process needs to fully engage all the actors composing the scenario, such as decision-makers, officials, faith-based and civil society organizations, scholars, practitioners, and media professionals. To support inclusivity and the actions implemented, youth and women must be involved as primary characters. This would allow the benefits of dialogue to spread across the political, cultural, and social fabric in an integrated and synergic fashion.

To strengthen the effectiveness of these efforts, direct reference to official declarations or statements issued by prominent religious leaders and organizations would help provide dialogue and exchange with a sound conceptual framework and useful guidelines. Among the most recent initiatives, the Document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together", signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, on 4 February 2019, and the outputs of the summit held by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul on 14-15 April 2016, clearly indicate the path forward.

The "Human Fraternity" Document calls for "the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard". "Dialogue" is widely emphasized in the text, and is associated to the "promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully", as opposed to violent extremism, which is the result of "a political manipulation of religions" and of "incorrect interpretations of religious texts".

"Terrorists instrumentalize" religion, "this is why it is so necessary to stop supporting terrorist movements fuelled by financing, the provision of weapons and strategy, and by attempts to justify these movements even using the media". "All these must be regarded as international crimes that threaten security and world peace". Security-wise, particular attention is paid to the "places of worship". Their "protection" is defined as a "duty", while attacks or threats against them is

a violation of both "religious teachings" and "international law".

The "Istanbul Declaration on Unity and Solidarity for Justice and Peace" highlights that OIC Member States "refuse sectarianism and doctrinarism in all its forms and manifestations; and encourage national efforts aimed at combating sectarian and discriminatory policies and practices as well as at enhancing reconciliation among all Muslims". The Final Communiqué of the summit "underscored the need to shun the sectarian and denominational agenda as it carries destructive impacts and serious repercussions for Member States' security and stability and for international peace and security".

The Communiqué also "stressed the importance of reinforcing relations of good neighbourliness among the Member States", urging them "to strengthen existing mechanisms for intra-Islam dialogue in order to help avoiding misperceptions and promote better understanding and mutual respect". The OIC Program of Action 2025, approved during the Istanbul summit as well, includes "intercultural and interfaith dialogue" among its priority interests.

These and other influential documents fully recognize the major role that interreligious dialogue can play in achieving and preserving peace and security in the MENA region. The same awareness is making its way also in the broader international community, where intergovernmental organizations and states are increasingly assessing interreligious dialogue as an area of engagement for their public and cultural diplomacies. As stakeholders themselves, they are now called to step up their support and encouragement to local actors engaged in cooperative and plural interfaith efforts, for which the latter retain ownership and responsibility.

Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism

A widely shared assumption is that radical and extremist religious ideologies and doctrines, although rarely the primary factor of violence and conflict, tend to aggravate tensions within and between social groups, polarize societies, facilitate the recourse to violence, and bring about protracted conflicts. Numerous factors lead to the nexus between religious radical thinking and violence. In particular, the capacity of extremist ideologues and movement leaders to spread worldviews and doctrines that result from the manipulation of the scriptures and religious tradition. Such views disqualify religious pluralism, contradict humanist and

democratic principles, and provide value to an allegedly sacred use of violence. Based on a simplistic, divisive, Manichean, and often eschatological interpretation, these views – although minoritarian – have proven influential, especially amongst a marginalized or precarious youth. The promoters of radical thinking particularly take advantage of structural multifaceted crises and of insufficiently regulated social media to gain in visibility and increase their audience. To counter this phenomenon, different but complementary action lines need to be undertaken.

A first action line should address the theological field in order to deconstruct radical interpretations and doctrines. It should focus on the consolidation of a theological and interpretative work on religious texts, mobilizing the resources of hermeneutics and social sciences, in order to better invalidate misleading notions, fake news and abusive interpretations. This would help re-connect religions (with particular regard to Islam) to their inherent holistic, ethical, inclusive, and spiritual dimension, emancipating from dichotomic and simplistic views. It is important to acknowledge the randomity and fluctuation of the extremist discourse's content to better deconstruct it, proactively and not just in a reactive way.

A second main action regards the spreading of a humanist, contextualized, and methodological understanding of the scriptures among the believers, more especially among the most vulnerable categories. In the case of Islam, this approach – linked with the so-called "wasatiyya" ("moderate") Islam – can be conveyed through the training of imams, the education of the youth, and a societal dissemination. The latter should incorporate grass-root "face-to-face" initiatives, as well as a work on the internet pursuing a deconstruction of extremist views and a wider diffusion of religiously-based ethical values. The work on prevention and deradicalization must take into consideration the interplay between the risk of religious radicalization and other non-religious factors. The work on training and dissemination should include the support in favour of legitimate and trusted religious leadership who are likely to promote and spread pacifying views. Religious leadership is particularly precious in this work, since it is socially connected to the grass-root society at a domestic level and, at the same time, it often manages transnational networks and diplomatic activities.

The actors involved in preventing and eradicating radical thinking and violent extremism need greater support. In the last decades, these actors have increased in numbers and diversified in terms of typology. Domestic or international, public or

private, faith-based or secular entities and leaders have elaborated views, strategies and tools to tackle the pervasive and destabilizing global trend represented by religious extremism. Despite varying approaches, interests and identities, they often join hands within multiple arenas of cooperation at various scales, from the micro-local to the supra-state one, contributing to a global governance of the phenomenon.

To be efficient, these action lines should fully include women. The latter have indeed contributed significantly to a renewed theological work sensitive to humanist values, and represent influential categories within the society in terms of education and daily mobilization against radicalization. The youth should also be fully incorporated in the various initiatives, as it represents the first demographic category in many areas, the main motor of change as well as a privileged target for extremist groups.

Fostering Reconciliation and Peaceful Coexistence

The conflicts and instability that have engulfed the MENA region for decades embed a marked identitarian dimension, either religious, ethnic, tribal, and territorial in nature, or a combination thereof. The predominance of "exclusivist" views and approaches – pursuing the hegemony of an identity to the detriment of others or their removal from the public space, as in the case of the religious one – aggravated cross-cutting cleavages, paving the way to discrimination, human rights violations, warfare, radicalization, and violent extremism.

This calls for the implementation of governance models that are truly capable to foster actual reconciliation and peaceful coexistence among the vast range of the MENA populations and groups within a nationwide all-encompassing framework.

As a lesson learned from the crisis scenarios following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2011 Arab uprisings, the nation and state-building processes need to concentrate on laying the foundations for fully inclusive systems in terms of citizenship, communal belonging, and management of public affairs. Technical aspects such as elections, institutional capacity-building, the strengthening of civil society, or the security sector reform, are necessary but not sufficient elements to legitimize the emerging government structures, taking into account that political and social legitimacy is the main prerequisite for a successful political transition.

As for the "religious factor" specifically, the notion of "positive secularism" might

inspire renewed efforts to put into effect successful governance policies and practices, as it would ensure the respect for several criteria of the utmost importance. Among them, the separation between religion and politics at institutional level; the acknowledgement of the inherent relevance of religions in the social and cultural fabric of MENA countries; the mutual recognition between majority and minorities of each other's religious identities and prerogatives in a win-win situation; the establishment of cooperative and integrated relations between different religious groups predicated on humanistic and democratic values.

Through their guidance and the promotion of dialogue, the role of religious leaders would be key to enabling such a setup of interreligious relations. This setup, in turn, might be translated into constitutional and legislative provisions introducing checks and balances aimed at ensuring the compliance of power sharing arrangements with democratic practices. In particular, ad hoc constitutional guarantees for the civil and political rights of minorities might be useful to address communal concerns, with an accent put on the respect for religious freedom. Religious freedom entails freedom of conscience and not only of worship.

Therefore, changing religious affiliation must be decriminalized wherever it is still prohibited by law, as a major step that will help tackle also the possible social repercussions for the individuals involved.

The concerns of minorities need to be met as well in regard to:

– Their safety and protection, creating the proper security conditions for the return to the place of origin of those who were displaced or forced to flee;

– Their inclusion within administrative boundaries demarcated coherently with their history and the development of their community life, avoiding any manipulation and gerrymandering;

– Their participation in the decision-making process and fair institutional representation, both locally and nationally (municipal councils, police, parliament, judiciary, constitutional court, other bodies);

– Their access to services, labour, and economic opportunities, above all for the youth and women.

The latter issue affects in general the most vulnerable categories in MENA countries' societies, and was among the root-causes of the turmoil erupted in 2011. To

ensure welfare and social justice, curtailing the endemic corruption that hampers the effective functioning of the public administrations and services, is of paramount importance to achieve and consolidate a sustainable and enduring social contract between the citizens and the state.

Moreover, a governance that fulfils the basic interests and demands of the population is necessary to prevent the emergence of non-state actors with radical and sectarian agendas that instrumentalize religions for political purposes. These actors hold the ability to make up for the shortcomings of public authorities, supplanting them in their duties and establishing their own state within the state, with repercussions on peace and security on a national, regional, and international level.

Transversal Action Lines and Conclusive Elements

To implement efficiently the above actions in the three main fields identified, the proceedings of the Study Seminar shed light on a series of transversal issues and recommendations.

The first recommendation regards the importance of "temporality". "Temporality" varies according to the type of actor involved in peace-building in the field, and is also much different for peace-builders as a whole (peace-building requiring much time and efforts), compared to extremist groups (destabilization and violence being immediately effective and visible). The various pacifying and preventive actions should be enshrined both in long-time processes (education, citizenship building, state-building, socio-economic inclusivity, dissemination of a culture of alterity, change of mentalities) and in short-term and daily actions and objectives (interreligious and intercultural dialogue, religiously mixed initiatives and projects).

The second recommendation is the necessity of adopting a pluri-dimensional approach, combining altogether and simultaneously psychological, social, educational, economic, theological, legal, political, and diplomatic aspects, and being aware of the interplay between these dimensions. This approach relates to a positive definition of peace, deriving from peace studies but also from the ethics and philosophy of peace and social cohesion offered by religions. To be genuine, virtuous, and sustainable, peace should not be understood as the mere absense of war and violence, but in a more holistic way, as linked with the establishment of a society in which human dignity (welfare, civil rights, non violence) is respected,

and having a harmonious way of functioning (rejection of majoritarianism and minoritarianism, democratic processes of policy making and regulation).

The third recommendation is to acknowledge the specificities of the context (socio-economic, political, geostrategic, communities), in order to better adapt and elaborate ad hoc actions, avoiding top-down and inaccurate models and schemes. At the same time, there is the need to identify common issues and perspectives to take benefit from the knowledge of existing practices and know-how related to other cases and areas (need for inclusive citizenship, struggle against corruption, addressing main socio-economic difficulties, and build state capabilities with a reinforced local public service).

A fourth recommendation is to reinforce the diplomatic arena, by fostering international cooperation and partnership at all levels, which is demanded and needed by the population, and by fostering humanist and democratic values through soft-power, taking into account the local cultures and aspirations. A major attention has to be paid to non-governmental organizations, whether international or local, who play an essential role in dealing with the civil population, especially with the destitute categories, often in remote and instable areas in which they are the only actor intervening.

Another main recommendation is to connect and multiply the layers, scales, and fields of cooperation (local and micro local initiatives to be linked with transnational and international ones), in order to better share knowledge, doubts, lessons learned, and good practices, and to spread norms, practices, values, and the culture of peace. This is through this ramified transnational network of peace, in which the "religious factor" plays and can play a virtuous role, that a global synergy can merge.

Finally, one crucial transversal recommendation is the overall incorporation of women at all scales and in all the fields of peace-building mentioned in the Study Seminar (such an injunction being equally valid for any other sphere of social life). In the long course of history and in all place and cultural-religious contexts, despite a lack of visibility, women have demonstrated a sustained effort for peace in all its dimension (social ties, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, education to non-violence, care), and for a humanist and an inclusive theology. At the same time, they remain marginal in most diplomatic, legal, and clerical spheres. A greater sensitiveness to the contribution of women is thus needed, as well as concrete efforts for their greater engagement and inclusion.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Col. Massimo Di Pietro
Director, NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE)

Colonel Massimo Di Pietro began his studies at the "Nunziatella" Military School in 1988. Following his diploma in 1991, he joined the Military Academy, graduating in 1993 as Infantry 2nd Lieutenant. During the period 1993-1995, he continued his military formation in Turin, completing a degree in Politics and International Relations. He was also deployed abroad, to Bosnia and Afghanistan, serving as a PSYOPS Plans Officer. In this time frame, he also completed two Master's degrees: "Security dynamics in the Mediterranean" (2002) and "Peace Keeping Security Studies" (2003).

Col. Di Pietro attended the General Staff Course in Turin in 2006, where he attained a Master's degree in political science, following which he was transferred to Solbiate Olona (Varese) at the ITA NATO Rapid Deployable Corps. In 2009-2010, he attended the Joint Superior Staff Course in Rome, where he gained a Master's degree in International Security Studies. In 2010-2014, he was posted to the ITA Army General Staff in the Operations Department. He was also deployed abroad: Afghanistan in 2012 and USCENTCOM (Tampa, USA) in 2013.

As Lieutenant Colonel, he took over command of the 1st Battalion (5th Infantry Regiment) in Messina (2014-2016). From September 2015 to May 2016, he served as Force Protection Task Force Commander in the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. In June 2016, he was moved to the Joint Operations HQ. In July 2017 he was promoted Colonel, and in 2018 he was appointed commander of the 6th Bersaglieri Regiment in Trapani.

Since April of 2020, Col. Di Pietro is the Director of the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE) in Cesano di Roma.

Mr. Emiliano Stornelli
Chairman, Religion & Security Council (RSC)

Mr. Emiliano Stornelli is the founding Chairman of the Religion & Security Council (RSC). He established RSC in 2016 to promote the role of the "religious factor" in conflict resolution, peace-building, advancing dialogue and cooperation in areas of crisis. His expertise encompasses a variety of fields, such as: research and analysis on foreign affairs and security issues, with particular focus on the MENA and Gulf region; addressing radicalization and violent extremism; promotion of interreligious dialogue initiatives engaging religious leaders, decision-makers, officials, scholars, practitioners, and civil society organizations.

He designed and coordinated interreligious programs in Lebanon (Tripoli – 2018, 2019, 2023), as well as forums, panel discussions, and study seminars, with participants from Europe, Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

Currently, Emiliano Stornelli is also Advisor on Research and Program Development to the "De Gasperi" Foundation (Rome); Subject Matter Expert on "Religion, Peace, and Security" at the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE); KAICIID European Fellow; Advisor to the Nordic Counter Terrorism Network (NCTN), International Association for Counter-Terrorism and Security Professionals (IACSP), and to the IACSP Southeast Asia Region (IACSP SEA). Formerly, he was an Advisor on Program Development to the Pontifical Missionary Union and the International Center for Mission and Formation, Vatican City (2016-2020); Director of the Mediterranean & Middle East Program at the Italian Atlantic Committee (Rome, 2011-2016), and Advisor to the President of the Atlantic Treaty Association (Brussels, 2014-2016).

Specialized in Strategic Studies at the Center for High Defense Studies (Italian Ministry of Defense), Emiliano Stornelli was Visiting Researcher at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C., and collaborated with the Military Center for Strategic Studies. He graduated at LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome.

Dr. Sihem Djebbi
Associate Professor,
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Dr. Sihem Djebbi is a French and Tunisian political scientist specialized in armed conflict, international cooperation, and in the political sociology of the MENA region. After having graduated from Sciences Po Paris in Political Sciences (2005) and in International Relations (2008), she was in charge of the implementation in France of a EU program of long-term settlement in favor of refugees, at France Terre d'Asile (2005-2008), and then a young research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Research at the Military School depending on the French Ministry of Armed Forces (2009-2011).

Since 2009, she has been teaching political sciences in France at the University Sorbonne Paris Nord and at Sciences Po Paris. Since 2018, she has been holding courses on interreligious dialogue in the Mediterranean at the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy (San Luigi section). She regularly delivers trainings to civil and military personnel intervening in peace and conflict resolution operations, in collaboration with the Post Conflict Operations Study Centre in Turin, the Training Command and Application School of the Army, and with NATO CIMIC Group in Treviso. She also trains theologians (in collaboration with the Italian Association of Theology), humanitarian and social personnel (in collaboration with the French para-public association France Terre d'Asile), and mediators (University of Siena).

She intervenes in media programs dealing with crises in the Middle East (France Culture, Radiotelevisione Svizzera di Lingua italiana, Mediapart), and publishes in peer-review journals such as Les Cahiers de l'Orient, Rivista di Teologia dell'Evangelizzazione, Dialoghi, Les Champs de mars.

Lt. Gen. Stefano Del Col
Director at the Supreme Council of Defense, Italian Presidency of the Republic
Former UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander

Lt. Gen. Stefano Del Col is Director at the Supreme Council of Defense, Italian Presidency of the Republic, a body set forth by the Constitution to analyze general and technical political issues relating to national security and defense. Chaired by the President of the Republic, the Council is composed of the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Economy and Finance, Defense, Economic Development, and the Chief of the Defense Staff.

From 2018 to 2022, Lt. Gen. Del Col served as Head of Mission and Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Prior, during his career in the Italian Army, Lt. Gen. Del Col has held numerous high-level assignments, such as Deputy Head of Cabinet of the Ministry of Defense and Head of the Strategic and Operational Direction Branch, Defense General Staff. In the latter capacity, he has been in charge of overseeing at the strategic level the national joint contribution in military operations abroad within the UN, NATO, and EU frameworks, particularly in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Afghanistan (NATO ISAF) and Libya (NATO OUP). Moreover, Lt. Gen. Del Col served as Head of the National and NATO Force Planning Section at the Planning Branch of the Army General Staff. Internationally, he has been Commander of the NATO Task Force in Kosovo (KFOR), as well as of the Italian contingent in the Western Sector of UNIFIL and of the UNIFIL Italian Battle Group, Operation "Leonte". He has also been assigned to Upavon, Salisbury (UK), as Liaison Officer with the British Army.

A Commanding Officer of the Bersaglieri Corps, Lt. Gen. Del Col headed the 11th Bersaglieri Battalion, the 8th Bersaglieri Regiment in Caserta, and the Pinerolo Brigade in Bari. He attended the Royal College of Defense Studies (RCDS) in London and the Joint Staff College (ISSMI) in Rome. Decorated Knight of the Military Order of Italy, Lt. Gen. Del Col collaborates with the Italian Red Cross for the teaching of international humanitarian law, and with various universities and national and international research institutes.

Dr. Elie Al Hindy

Executive Director, Adyan Foundation

Dr. Elie Al Hindy is the Executive Director of the "Adyan Foundation", a non-governmental organization based in Beirut, Lebanon, promoting dialogue and cooperation between different religious groups to advance conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peace-building. Prior, Dr. Al Hindy served as Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the Notre Dame University-Louaize, where he has also been Chairperson of the Department of Government and International Relations. Former Director of the Middle East Institute for Research and Strategic Studies (MEIRSS), Dr. Al Hindy has published extensively on subjects related to the MENA region and is a regular commentator in the media.

Dr. Al Hindy is co-founder of the Association Libanaise pour l'Éducation et la Formation (ALEF), and former President of its Board of Directors. He has a vast experience on a national and international level in training and consultancy on matters of human rights and youth participation, civil society and religious minorities, democracy and elections, conflicts management and peace education.

He earned a PhD in Government and International Relations from the Sydney University, Australia, in addition to an MBA in International Affairs and Diplomacy, and two bachelor degrees in Political and Administrative Sciences, and International Affairs and Diplomacy, from the Notre Dame University-Louaize.

Dr. Majeda Omar
Associate Professor, University of Jordan
Former Director, Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies

Dr. Majeda Omar is Associate Professor of Contemporary Western Philosophy at the University of Jordan in Amman, Jordan. Former Director of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS), in this capacity she has been engaged in awareness and educational programs on the role of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in promoting peaceful coexistence, combating extremism, and overcoming sectarianism in the MENA region, along the lines of the "Amman Message Initiative" launched by HM King Abdullah II.

Religious leaders, youth, and women were the main target groups of her work, which also focused on social media as a space for promoting interfaith relations. She advocated for interreligious peace-building within the context of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, endorsed by the UN General Assembly on a proposal from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and addressed the UN Conference on the "Role of religious leaders from the Middle East and North Africa region in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes", as well as other international seminaries and events, such as those organized by RIIFS in collaboration with the Al Azhar Al Sharif University, the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue (Holy See, Vatican City), and the Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas, Kingdom of Morocco.

Prior, Dr. Majeda Omar served as Senior Researcher at the Majlis El Hassan, Royal Hashemite Court, and held the positions of Head of the Philosophy Department, Director of the Scientific Research Documentation Office, and Director of the Department of Media and Public Relations, at the University of Jordan. She earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland; a B.Sc. in Mathematics from Yarmouk University, Jordan; a Diploma in Philosophical Studies and an M.A. in Philosophy, from the University of Jordan.

Prof. Aicha Haddou

Director of Ta'aruf – Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Centre, Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

Prof. Aicha Haddou is Director of Ta'aruf Center – Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Center, affiliated to the Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas, Kingdom of Morocco. With a background in religious studies (Faculty of Theology, Louvain-la-Neuve Catholic University, Belgium), her expertise in research, teaching, and project management encompasses a variety of fields related to religion and peace-building, among them: interfaith relations, the prevention of violent extremism and online radicalization, women's religious and interfaith leadership, women's leadership for peace and security, education to peace and human rights, the theology of diversity and environment.

Prof. Haddou is a founding member of the regional platform "Gender and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in North Africa", promoted by UN Women (MENA Regional Office), and is currently leading a Rabita's project addressing online radicalization, in partnership with the UK Embassy in Morocco. Moreover, she teaches courses on Islam in North Africa and on Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco at the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES Abroad Centre Rabat). Prior, Prof. Haddou directed other Rabita's projects, such as "Women's Leadership for Peace-Building, Counter-Terrorism, and Religious Radicalism", supported by UN Women Regional and the UK Government, and "Violent Extremism, Female Leadership and Peace-Building", in cooperation with UN Women Regional. She also served as a consultant and moderator at the UN Global Digital Consultation, UN Global Counterterrorism Coordination Pact (Gender Working Group), chaired by UN Women, New York.

Prof. Haddou took part in the International Visitor Leadership Program "Women Leaders Promoting Peace and Security", conducted by the U.S. Department of State, and has been a member of the Higher Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research, appointed by His Majesty King Mohammed VI.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini
President, Islamic Religious Community of Italy (COREIS)
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Imam Yahya Pallavicini is President of the Italian Islamic Religious Community (COREIS), one of the main organizations of institutional representation of the Islamic religion in Italy, with a vocation for theological training, ecumenism, and intercultural education. In his capacity as President of COREIS, Imam Yahya Pallavicini served as an advisor to the Ministry of the Interior and as a member of the Italian Government Council for Italian Islam. Moreover, he partnered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in cultural exchange initiatives between Italy and the Muslim world.

Among his international assignments, Imam Yahya Pallavicini is Ambassador for Dialogue between Civilizations of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), headquartered in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco; Member of the Executive Board of the World Muslim Communities Council (WMCC) in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Vice President of the Muslim Jewish Leaders Council (MJLC). Imam Yahya Pallavicini has been among the 50 Muslim scholars who participated in the first conference on *Wasatiyyah*, the doctrine of Islamic moderation, held under the auspices of the Presidency of the Republic of Indonesia, and among the 138 Muslim scholars to endorse the initiative "A Common Word", launched by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Moreover, he was engaged in the drafting of the "Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent and Counter Incitement to Violence", promoted by the United Nations and KAICIID.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini has lectured on Islamic studies, interreligious dialogue, and the prevention of radicalism, at Italian and international universities, think tanks, and research institutes, including the NATO Defense College. He addressed as speaker the G20 Interfaith Forum 2021 held in Bologna, Italy.

Dr. Elie Abouaoun

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
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Dr. Elie Abouaoun has been a Senior Fellow at the Religion & Security Council (RSC) since 2020. From 2013 to 2023, he served as the MENA Regional Director at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), after holding the position of Executive Director at the Arab Human Rights Fund (2011-2013) and the Iraq Program Manager at the Danish Refugee Council (2007-2011). Currently, he is also managing partner, senior consultant, and trainer with Elephas Consulting in Ottawa, Canada.

With a career spanning over two decades, Dr. Abouaoun thus comes with a considerable experience in the areas of peace and conflict studies, humanitarian aid, and human rights, and played a crucial role in providing strategic guidance and expertise to international, regional, and local not for profit organizations.

Dr. Abouaoun holds various academic positions as a Visiting Lecturer in the MENA region, and is an international fellow of the Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. He regularly contributes to publications throughout the MENA region, Europe, and the United States, and continues to serve on the board of directors for several regional not for profit organizations. Dr. Abouaoun gained a Master's in business administration and management, and is a Doctor of Dental Surgery.

Hon. Pascale Isho Warda

Senior Fellow, Religion & Security Council (RSC)
President, Hammurabi Human Rights Organization
Former Minister for Migration and the Displaced, Iraqi Interim Government

Hon. Pascale Isho Warda is Co-Founder and President of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, based in Baghdad, Iraq. As Former Minister for Migration and the Displaced in the Iraqi Interim Government, she has been the first Christian woman to be appointed as Minister in the history of the country. Hon. Isho Warda is a founding and board member of the Iraqi Women's Network, and has received numerous international acknowledgments, among them the Best Human Rights Defender Award from the UN Human Rights Council, Middle East and North Africa Division; the Order of the French Parliament; the International Award for Religious Freedom and Human Rights from the U.S. Department of State in 2019, along with her husband William Warda. The Hammurabi Human Rights Organization won the U.S. Department of State's Human Rights Defenders Award in 2012.

Hon. Isho Warda took part in many interfaith dialogue initiatives, including at the Holy See, Vatican City, and she is a regular speaker in conferences, seminars, and other events, held inside and outside Iraq, on topics such as religious and ethnic minorities, human and women rights, religious freedom, immigration and asylum policies, de-radicalization and countering violent extremism. A Chaldean Catholic and ethnic Assyrian, she was born in Duhok but later exiled to France. In France and later in Syria, she worked with the Assyrian Democratic Movement.

In Damascus, she co-founded the Iraqi Society for Human Rights, and led for many years its public relations department. After returning to Iraq in 2001, Hon. Isho Warda served for six years as Head of the Assyrian Women's Union, and as external affairs manager of the Assyrian Aid Society-Iraq. She holds an M.A. and a Diploma of Advanced Studies in Human Rights from the Catholic University of Lyon.

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