A Whole of Society Approach: Religious Actors as Drivers of Change and Preventing Violent Extremism

Date: June 23 at 10:00 AM – 11:30 AM ET

Location: Baha'i International Community, 866 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017 (Hybrid)

Background:

A significant portion of the UN system and other intergovernmental organizations operate in contexts and regions where religious leaders and actors play a role in shaping customs, practices, and peace and development work. As such, it's important to understand their efforts carefully and build inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships while sensitively taking in consideration their complex roles in the respective community. Engaging religious leaders and actors, including women and youth in the process, design, and implementation of policy frameworks on peace and security, especially when countering violent extremism is critical for its effectiveness.

Historically, religious and traditional actors have long played a vital role in conflict-affected societies and situations of transition due to their established "governance systems," along with their built-in conflict prevention, management, and resolution mechanisms. Moreover, they have provided vital social services to local communities, including humanitarian aid, health, and education alongside the faith-based organization. These actors have established unique connections based on mutual respect and trust with local communities and are equally aligned with the core values raised in the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Over the years, there has been recognition of the critical role of religious actors through greater engagement and allocation of resources towards mobilizing the capacities and ingenuity of these actors. However, at times, international organizations or policymakers have failed to carefully understand the complex roles of these actors and instrumentalized them in the process of achieving their goals. Instrumentalizing religious actors is extremely counterproductive and can jeopardize their safety and security. As such, engagement with religious actors must be designed carefully by understanding their roles and history, with inclusivity at its core.

In 2017, the United Nations Secretary-General launched the Plan of Action on the Role of Religious Leaders and Actors to Preventing Incitement to Violence that could lead to Atrocity Crimes,[1] which is the first UN document on the role of religious leaders and actors in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes. The Plan of Action consists of tools and

[1] This Plan of Action, led by the UN Office for Genocide Prevention, was the result of two years of consultations with leaders from different faiths and religions around the world, includes a rich and broad range of suggestions for ways in which religious leaders and actors can prevent incitement to violence and contribute to peace and stability.

frameworks on how to engage religious actors, design trainings, and ensure effective collaboration. It offers a set of options for actions that religious leaders can take to prevent and counter incitement to violence, such as countering hate speech both online and offline though unequivocal messages, as well as supporting interfaith dialogue, education and activities that uphold respect for religious and cultural diversity. Additionally, it enhances civic space for religious actors and unites them to prevent and counter violence.

It plays a critical role in conflict prevention and countering violent extremism and is implemented jointly by the UN and many religious actors and faith-based institutions.

Objective:
On the margins of the 2023 Counter-Terrorism Week, this side event will highlight the importance of the Plan of Action as an essential tool for conflict prevention and countering violent extremism and atrocity crimes while ensuring protection of human rights. The event will showcase good practices and lessons learned of implementation, including building effective and holistic partnership between the UN Member States and Agencies, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders to contribute to sustainable development and peace. It will also offer reflections on ways to further strengthen capacity building programmes.

Format:
This 90min side-event will be conducted in an interactive format. It will include presentations and panel discussions.

Outcomes:
- Build multi-stakeholder engagement while protecting human rights through understanding on how and when to engage religious actors and faith-based institutions;
- Discuss localized solutions and challenges for religious and traditional actors to enhance partnership and advocacy with the UN at the regional, national, and local levels;
- Generate new ideas to further strengthen capacity building programmes, which are in line with international human rights standards.

Guiding Questions:
- What critical role do diverse religious leaders and actors play in countering hate speech and preventing violent extremism in conflict-affected or fragile states?
- The UN counter-terrorism framework has often been constrained by its narrow focus of preventing violent extremism through a securitized approach. How can the UN and its Member States meaningfully include local actors - bottom up - in its development policies to provide solutions to violent extremism. How can the UN work with religious actors and faith-based institutions without jeopardizing their safety and security?

- How have organizations integrated and implemented the Plan of Action in your programmes? What are some of the challenges and lessons learned?
- Youth are often better positioned in promoting tolerance and countering harmful narratives amongst their peers, however, they are often left out of the policy making decisions. What are some promising youth specific practices that can inform new UN policies and programmes, especially since the UN Secretary-General is developing a New Agenda for Peace?
- What are some examples or programs, focusing on the role of the digital community in implementing the Plan of Action (particularly influencers and social media channels)?