

Meeting with religious leaders and faith based organisations from the European region on their role in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes

Treviso, Italy, 16-18 September 2015

Recommendations for a regional strategy

Following an open and constructive discussion among religious leaders from the European region representing different religions and faiths, and representatives of faith based organisations, on actions that could be taken within the European context to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes, and counter and respond to such incitement when it occurs, participants made the following recommendations, which are based on the Fez Plan of Action. These include **recommendations for local, national and regional authorities as well as religious leaders**, with focus on the following:

- 1. Education and capacity building**
- 2. Engaging religious leaders to prevent incitement**
- 3. Engaging with and seeking support from political leaders**
- 4. Using the internet and social media**
- 5. Addressing current challenges in Europe: (i) Radicalization of youth**
- 6. Addressing current challenges in Europe: (ii) Responding to the refugee crisis**

1. Education and capacity-building

Recommendations for religious leaders and faith based organisations:

- Organise training for religious leaders, including female religious leaders, on how to use the social media and operate in a social media environment;
- Organize training on strategic communication for lay leaders of religious communities with the aim of preventing and countering hate speech and incitement to violence with alternative narratives;
- Include, wherever possible, education about the history and prevention of atrocity crimes in the curricula for the training of religious community managers and faith-based schools managers, just as it is in the curricula for the training of teachers, law enforcement officers and others (the training infrastructure in Europe is available);
- Develop comprehensive guidance for education stakeholders (including faith based educators) on how they can take effective action to prevent and counter radicalization of youth and violent extremism within the broader framework of Global Citizenship Education and Media and Information Literacy;
- Strengthen the capacity of faith leaders to engage with youths who are at risk of radicalisation; recognise that some faith leaders may be unwilling to engage with at-risk youths if they may be harassed by law enforcement authorities or stigmatised by media;
- Religious leaders should support faith leaders who engage with youths who are radicalised or at risk of radicalisation;

- Develop an interfaith and intercultural education curriculum for public schools;
- UNESCO could serve as a clearing house for good practices on education against hatred and incitement as well as educational practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.

2. Engaging religious leaders to prevent incitement

Recommendations for religious leaders and faith based organisations:

- Organise/bring together religious leaders at the national level with the aim of meeting with national education ministries to advocate for schools curricula to include and value diversity and equality;
- While underlining the importance of respecting all religions and religious beliefs, publicly challenge exclusiveness of faiths with the aim of developing an overlapping consensus on key issues linked to the prevention and countering of hate speech, incitement to violence and radicalisation;
- Encourage other religious leaders to discard the concept of exclusivity, through consensus, and accept that the public sphere belongs to everybody, whatever their religion or belief;
- Foster intra-religious dialogue also as a platform for all voices to be heard;
- Promote inter-religious and inter-convictional cooperation on all social issues of relevance to communities, in particular through joint activities;
- Support the role of local religious leaders and communities who are better placed to act as mediators of religious and cultural doctrines;
- Encourage religious leaders to take public stances in support of religious groups other than their own, individually and in cooperation with each other;
- Encourage religious leaders to engage in dialogue with, rather than exclude, individuals with radical and extremist views;
- Organise community level initiatives to promote inter-communal dialogue and respect. For example, organise public events such as “flash mobs” against hatred, discrimination and intolerance against Muslims, Christians, Jews and representatives of other religious or belief groups;
- Support the ordination and appointment of women as religious leaders;
- Increase and strengthen the profile of women, both religious and secular, who are working to prevent incitement to atrocity crimes and violent extremism. Establish a women’s faith leaders sub-group to help support female commitment to preventing incitement to violence and violent extremism.

3. Engaging with and seeking support from political leaders

Recommendations for religious leaders and faith based organisations:

- Engage with political leaders to organize at national level an annual “week of mutual respect”, based on the Netherlands model;

- Organise joint meetings of religious leaders with public officials and political leaders at local and national level to inform them about the Treviso meeting and its outcomes;
- Request political support for implementation of the recommendations of the meeting;
- Keep security officials updated concerning risks that religious leaders may face if they speak out or take action against violent extremism, radicalisation of youth, or in response to “hate speech”, xenophobia, racism or incitement to violence; if necessary, ask for protection for religious leaders who may be at risk;

4. Using the internet and social media

Recommendations for religious leaders and faith based organisations:

At the individual level:

- Engage with radicalised individuals online (especially on Twitter, as this is where most of the action is) using arguments from their own religious traditions. In this context, use the reverse engineering methodology (target those who have the most questions as well as those who claim to know and interpret the Holy Scriptures and religious messages correctly).

At the community level:

- Speak out online and offline showing “passionate moderation”. The silence of religious leaders is not acceptable and should not be an option;
- Engage with social media regarding the creation of positive adverts vis-a-vis a problematic content;
- Offer spiritual counselling on-line and off-line, especially to those at risk of being radicalised or who have joined radical groups;
- Create or strengthen websites offering religious and spiritual feedback on issues of contemporary relevance;
- Create Facebook pages on/for specific crises or issues to rally people; create a network of support to coordinate action;
- Disseminate weekly digest of Tweeter posts and feeds.

5. Addressing current challenges in Europe: (i) Radicalization of youth

Recommendations for religious leaders and faith based organisations:

→ Provide assistance to youth at risk of radicalisation by:

- Contributing to the creation of an alternative identity or sense of belonging, including by involving vulnerable youths in humanitarian activities, such as helping during the current refugee and migrant crisis;
- Reminding religious leaders that their pastoral responsibilities encompass all within the community, irrespective of their beliefs;

- Creating hotlines for counselling, including spiritual counselling: youth at risk often do not talk openly about their decision to join radical groups. Hotlines and spiritual counselling could be provided as a source of support/safe space to talk;
- Replicating the Aarhus model (Denmark) which aims at preventing radicalisation by creating collaboration between different institutions and providing assistance to at risk youth. This model includes the use of mentors for at risk youth;
- Connecting imams and other religious leaders with the local police to build trust and cooperation.

→ *Provide assistance to the families of youths who have joined extremist groups, including in conflict zones*

- Religious leaders and government institutions must support and not stigmatise the families of youths who have left their homes and joined extremist groups, including in conflict zones;
- Religious leaders should respect the right of families to mourn and carry out religious rites and duties to mark the deaths of family members who have died in conflict zones, including individuals considered to be “terrorists”.
- Religious leaders should also engage with state institutions to protect the rights of religious communities to carry out religious ceremonies and rituals, while respecting the laws of the State;
- Stronger alliances should be built between religious leaders and religious communities to support families of at risk youths and the youths themselves by, for instance, establishing networks of parents attached to specific mosques.

→ *Provide assistance to radicalised youths when they return from conflict areas*

- Religious leaders must provide expert support to youths who return; facilitate youth disengagement and de-radicalisation, including by providing psycho-social assistance and social services, such as advice on education, employment etc. While the law regarding possible criminal activity must be respected, a punitive approach that is not coupled with social reintegration efforts is likely to lead to further radicalisation.

→ *Other recommendations*

- Increase awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of youth radicalization and de-radicalization, including the gender dimension;
- Make sure such information is easily available, widely disseminated and used by young people and youth stakeholders to develop and improve local policies. In this context, develop a study of the paradigms and root causes of radicalization;
- Empower youth stakeholders to amplify counter messaging;
- Assess the psychological aspect of youth radicalisation, including identity crises, and provide a clear diagnosis, as well as psychosocial support, when needed.

6. Addressing current challenges in Europe (ii) Responding to the refugee crisis

At a time when Europe is called upon to welcome refugees in large numbers and there is a fear that, as a result, incitement will increase and xenophobia will intensify, religious leaders and their faith communities have a crucial role to play as custodians of the soul of Europe.

Recommendations for religious leaders and faith based organisations:

- Increase public understanding about the causes of the current influx of refugees and migrants to Europe, including the failure of the international community to prevent and halt the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, noting that civilians are bearing the brunt of these conflicts and millions of civilians have been forced to leave their homes;
- Emphasize that European states have an obligation to assist those seeking refuge from violent conflict and that a punitive, xenophobic approach towards the refugees and migrants entering Europe is likely to be counter-productive;
- Foster together the duty of hospitality as one of the common corner stones of the various faith traditions, including the humanist path. Interfaith cooperation should be visible in the homes and on the streets;
- Condemn racism and xenophobia targeting refugees at all times, which undermine and contradict values such as the equality and dignity of all human beings;
- Develop campaigns to counter negative narratives and promote a humane, non-discriminatory approach to the crisis;
- In response to the refugee crisis, develop timelines with actions that can take place over an extended period. Engage senior religious leaders to take part in such campaigns;
- Make policy recommendations to public officials and politicians from a freedom of religion or belief perspective that include proposals for crisis management (solutions for better organisation and processing of refugees and migrants), underline the right to freedom of religion or belief and the importance of preventing and countering of hate speech, incitement and radicalisation;
- Develop a social media strategy, including through the use of hashtags, blogs and tweets, focusing on the plight of refugees and migrants and providing alternative/positive stories;
- Highlight the spiritual dimension of the crisis (places of worship are places of asylum and safety; the stranger is welcome in all religious traditions and texts etc.);
- Denounce and expose fake stories and propaganda regarding refugees and migrants;
- Counter negative messages by other religious leaders, including from within one's own faith;
- Engage young people, in particular those at risk of radicalisation, in support activities for refugees and migrants (such as soup kitchens and events where they feel they can contribute to solving the problem and not becoming part of it).

Religious leaders and faith-based organisations should encourage the European Union, national and local authorities to:

- Recognise that the ongoing refugee/migrant crisis in Europe is a human emergency that needs to be addressed responsibly and humanely;
- Implement protective policies swiftly due to the approaching winter. In this context, urgent action is needed both in Europe and at its borders, as well as in the countries from which refugees and migrants originate;
- Express concern over and address discrimination based on religion or belief , noting that the willingness to defend Christianity has been the slogan of many politicians and political parties;
- Underline the obligation of States to respect human rights and humanitarian law, principles and standards;
- Protect the dignity of all those affected, irrespective of race, sex, language or religion;;
- Take into account the gender dimension of the current migration/ refugee crisis and call for the needs of affected men and women to be recognized and addressed in a gender-sensitive manner;
- Call for action to address the root causes of migration;
- Recognise and support the important, positive, public role that religious leaders can play during the current refugee and migrant crisis and involve religious leadership in decision-making processes and execution;
- Support and facilitate the development at local level of stronger bonds between local authorities, religious leaders and religious communities in order to provide a collective response to the crisis.

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