

The Abu Dhabi Statement: Rejecting Violent Religious Extremism and Advancing Shared Well-being

13 December 2014

Religion is a sublime ethical and spiritual force that aims to heal human society, provide security and peace among people and ensure human dignity and the rights that flow from it. However, some extremists abuse their religion, distorting its image and using it to achieve non-religious objectives. They project violent images that contradict and violate the essence of their religion.

Categorical Rejection of Violent Religious Extremism and its Purported Justifications

Religion is increasingly being abused in support of violent extremism—that is violence justified by an extremist religious ideology that does not acknowledge and honor human dignity and the rights that flow from it. There are other forms of violent extremism, for example, political and ethnic violent ideologies that purport to justify the killing of the innocent. While we deplore and condemn all forms of violent extremism, we, as religious leaders, accept a special responsibility to reject, condemn and take action against violent religious extremism. We are committed to mobilizing the great resources of our respective religious traditions to take action together to help overcome it.

Today, violent religious extremism causes the murder of innocents, immense suffering, the erosion of trust between different groups and fuels social hostility. In addition, violent religious extremist ideologies perversely twist and distort the religious heritages they purport to represent. Violent religious extremism is not limited to one group, region, culture, religion or historical period. Today, it is a plague to the entire world.

Violent religious extremism frequently employs terrorism—a virulent form of violent extremism designed to sow fear—to promote its ends that can include the desire to dominate others, control resources and obtain political power. Violent religious extremists cloak themselves with false religious doctrines to justify their acts and use grossly erroneous moral justifications to inflict terror against “unbelievers”.

We are profoundly concerned that violent religious extremism is malignant and metastasizing. Every religiously related hostility—every attack, every hate crime, every insult, every humiliation—is amplified in the media and sends out a polarizing wave that is fueling a rise in social hostility, that—in turn—can add to the seductions of violent religious extremism. New forms of social media are being widely and skillfully used to recruit youth to violent religious extremism.

We—respectful of our religious differences—stand morally united in rejecting every form of violent religious extremism. These are false religious ideologies of hatred, not Peace. They cloud and distort the lens by which individuals and groups can assess what is right or wrong. And this occurs on all levels of human living, including the level of feelings, which are simultaneously dulled, coarsened and inflamed. These twisted violent religious ideologies foster the acceptance of barbarism and butchery, justifying them, saying they are “right.” At bottom, they share in common the fatal flaw of failing to acknowledge and honor universal human dignity and the rights that flow from it. This misuse of religion is grievously mistaken; it is a source of anguish to all sincere believers; and it should in no way be confused with the variety of religious attempts to carefully delineate and strictly limit the rights for the use of force in self-defense.

Tackling the Drivers of Violent Religious Extremism

Whilst we categorically reject all justifications for violent religious extremism, we recognize that it is often “driven” or “promoted” by a variety of factors. Understanding these factors can guide our efforts to overcome violent religious extremism. These drivers can be grouped as the following:

- **Religious Ideological Drivers** which are misinterpretations of religion that attempt to justify violent extremism by building upon the fact that all religions have texts that have the potential to be misused in support of violence. These religious ideologies present themselves as narratives purporting to represent the truth of a given religion. These false narratives must be unmasked, debunked and replaced by authentic “counter-narratives” that bring to the fore each religion’s respect for human dignity and rejection of violent extremism as well as other forms of cultural violence. In fact, these “counter-narratives” of Peace are religions’ “primary narratives.” The primary narrative of each religion is about peace and human dignity.
- **Socio-economic Drivers** which include widespread abuses of fundamental human rights, poverty, lack of opportunity for upward mobility and the failure of governments to provide basic services, including education. The link between these deplorable conditions and violent extremism needs to be frankly acknowledged and responded to by promoting good governance, the rule of law, tolerance and addressing global poverty, thereby removing many of the factors that can “push” people towards violent religious extremism.
- **Psychological/Spiritual Drivers** which include the psychological and spiritual need to belong and the desire to be part of something bigger than one’s self. These may also include the desire to respond to affronts to one’s personal or collective senses of dignity. The psychological allure of violent religious extremism must be countered with true opportunities to build a meaningful life, including genuine ways of addressing long-standing injustices and contributing to the common good.

We believe that each of these so called “drivers” of violent religious extremism must be further analyzed and responded to with the capacities and resources of the religious communities. In addition, we note again that the impact of these drivers are being powerfully amplified in the new forms of media in skillful and well-funded campaigns designed to recruit people into forms of violent religious extremism. Thus, in addition to responding to the three sets of drivers, there is the great need to engage the media, especially social media to counter violent religious extremism.

The Need for a Multi-religious Approach

Our religious communities can and must respond to all of the “drivers” of violent religious extremism. A multi-religious response is a concrete and effective religious demonstration against violent religious extremism. It shows clearly that diverse religious communities share common concerns and are ready to engage together, while respecting religious differences.

Multi-religious approaches build solidarity around areas of shared concern and make clear that the religious “other” can be recognized as a moral ally, as opposed to an enemy. It also makes clear that an attack on any religion is—at root—an attack on all.

The strength and power of our multi-religious responses are rooted in each believer’s fidelity to his or her respective religion and the shared commitment to collaborate in tackling violent religious extremism. We agree that Peace, which is far more than the absence of conflict, is “positive,” and that it calls each religious community to stand in solidarity with the dignity, vulnerability and well-being of the “other,” with the full force of its respective spiritual and moral teachings. Such teachings are specific to each religious tradition. They include: the frank recognition of mutually inflicted injuries, striving for justice, accepting self-sacrifice for the well-being of others, bearing innocent suffering, returning good for evil, seeking and extending forgiveness and reconciliation and expressing unrestricted compassion and love in action.

The Need for a Multi-stakeholder Approach

To effectively respond to the “drivers” of violent religious extremism, we need a multi-stakeholder approach, with governments, civil society, and religious communities each playing their decisive and complementary roles. Each must use their strengths to blunt the drivers of violent religious extremism and each must contribute in its own way to a positive state of Peace that advances justice, encourages reconciliation for past injuries, upholds the dignity of all people and promotes shared human flourishing. Additional mechanisms to enhance collaboration at all levels must be created.

Calls on Governments and the United Nations

The multi-stakeholder approach to counter violent religious extremism must be balanced, focusing on both blunting the drivers of violent religious extremism and the threat of the extremist groups. It should recognize that an over-securitized approach can produce paradoxical results. In this we applaud the United Nations Security Council Resolutions that remind us that all efforts against violent extremism must respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and must be in compliance with other obligations under international law.

We also note that the most successful approaches will engage all elements of society and be inclusive of women. Women’s involvement is crucial. For example, women’s unique capabilities to reach into a variety of sectors and to identify and respond to the radicalization of youth must be fostered and supported.

Successful will also engage youth. Youth must be enabled to have their voices heard in political and national arenas so that they can help shape the society in which they live. This positive engagement will help counter the psychological lure of violent religious extremism.

With these considerations in mind, we call upon:

Governments to:

1. Cease and desist all funding and support to religious extremist groups. Supporting these groups allows them to grow and commit future terrorist acts.
2. Weaken the drivers of violent religious extremism by promoting tolerance, mutual respect and working to remove all forms of oppression and structural violence.
3. Work to reduce poverty and develop stable institutions that can deliver essential services to decrease the socio-economic drivers of violent extremism.
4. Foster policies of inclusiveness and develop strong civil societies to weaken the grip of psychological drivers that push people towards extremist groups.
5. Recognize and support the work of religious and multi-religious groups, including their women and youth groups, and civil society as major actors in the effort to counter violent extremism.

United Nations and its Member States to:

1. Abide (Member States) by all Security Council resolutions to combat violent extremism.
2. Deliver (Member States) on all Millennium Development and post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals to help eliminate the socio-economic drivers that push vulnerable populations toward violent extremism.
3. Facilitate (The United Nations, including notably the UN Alliance of Civilizations) governments and other stakeholders to form alliances to combine their strengths to counter violent extremism.

Calls on Religious Communities and *Religions for Peace* and the Forum for Peace in Muslim Societies

Based on shared commitments to Peace, we call on:

Religious Communities to:

1. Take the lead in unmasking, debunking and rejecting the misuse of religion as a (false) justification for violent religious extremism by presenting the authentic teachings of their respective religions that

reject violent extremism and affirm universal human dignity, particularly through religious education that takes place in local sites of worship.

2. Advance human dignity through concrete programs designed to overcome the abuses of human rights, poverty, the lack of basic services and other grievous threats to human dignity, such programs to include special attention to empowering youth and women.
3. Engage in dialogue to resolve conflict and increase inter-communal understanding to promote coexistence and respect for human dignity.
4. Equip religious youth groups for peer training and programs designed to provide religiously sensitive counseling that reject violent religious extremism and affirm human dignity.
5. Stand in solidarity with all religious believers and men and women of goodwill to condemn violent religious extremism.

***Religions for Peace* and the Forum for Peace in Muslim Societies to:**

1. Compile the relevant teachings of the world's diverse religious traditions that reject violent religious extremism and promote the common good; to build educational and training programs based upon them and to make them widely available.
2. Utilize the above materials to provide basic training in combating violent religious extremism across the entire *Religions for Peace (RfP)* movement—the RfP World Council, the RfP six Regional Councils, the RfP 90 National Councils and groups, the RfP Women of Faith Networks and the RfP Interfaith Youth Networks.
3. Respond with intensive programs on combating violent religious extremism in areas of crisis or growing vulnerability, including programs that couple the provision of strategic humanitarian assistance with specific trainings and other programs designed to combat violent religious extremism.
4. Engage in multi-religious partnerships with religious communities and their associated organizations.
5. Build multi-stakeholder partnerships to support multi-religious programs, including those designed to empower the youth and women to work together to address the drivers of violent religious extremism.
6. Harness the authoritative voices of the world's religious communities in large scale social media campaigns designed to unmask and delegitimize the misuse of religious meanings as the false justifications for violent religious extremism—such media campaigns to combine the strengths of religious elders, women and youth.
7. Advance programs that include religiously qualified personalities for the de-radicalization and rehabilitation of youth who have succumbed to violent religious extremism—such programs to be operated in accord with relevant legal codes.

Message of Hope

We live in a critical moment of history, the global human family is emerging and this gives reason for hope. Violent religious extremism must be resisted and does not extinguish our hope.

Core religious teachings on Peace and the universality of human dignity, respect for religious differences and a multi-religious commitment to take action together are powerful antidotes to violent religious extremism. Through the cooperation of religious communities, governments, intergovernmental bodies and other civil society actors, it will be possible to not only counter violent religious extremism, but also to build the common good that honors human dignity and advances the flourishing of the global family.

At the end of this blessed gathering of representatives of all religions that are in the service of peace and in the promotion of the culture and virtues of peace, the participants express their gratitude to the United Arab Emirates and to its President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and his Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan the Foreign Minister of the UAE for hosting this important meeting and providing all the necessary encouragement and support for its success.