



**United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Group of Friends Meeting (Ambassadors' level)**

New York, 19 April 2017

Summary Report

Background

On 19 April 2017, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) held a Group of Friends meeting on *Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue Processes as a Tool for Preventing Conflict and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding*. Prior to the event, UNAOC has circulated an advance copy of its annual activity report for January-December 2016.

The meeting was live streamed through UN Web TV and embedded on the UNAOC website. UNAOC covered interventions live on Twitter and Instagram, having displayed social media activity on screens in the conference room to engage meeting participants. The live social media coverage benefited from the attention of Twitter accounts with large followings, including @ahmedshaheed (the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief), @OIC_OCI (the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), and @nohate_speech (the Council of Europe's initiative against hate speech). The meeting ranked in the top 10 trending topics on Twitter in New York with its dedicated hashtag #Commit2Dialogue. The posts were delivered to 713,489 accounts and totaled 5,708,029 unique impressions. The social media conversation focused on intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as well as the importance of UNAOC as a platform for prevention.

Opening Session

The **High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations** opened the meeting by recognizing a high relevance of interreligious and intercultural dialogue processes in preventing conflict and in post-conflict peacebuilding. To date, UNAOC has made a considerable progress in promoting the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue through a wide range of partnerships with grassroots organizations, faith-based leaders, youth, media experts, academia and the business community.

The High Representative highlighted a number of UNAOC projects and initiatives, starting with the Youth Solidarity Fund (YSF) and its activities implemented through local youth-led organizations based in Indonesia, Nigeria and MENA. In 2016, as a follow up to the recommendations outlined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 and the Secretary-General's Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism, UNAOC launched Young Peacebuilders (YPB) programme, designed to support young people in Asia, MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa in gaining skills to promote diversity, peace and prevent violent conflicts. Under the Intercultural Innovation Award (IIA), a public-private partnership with the BMW Group, UNAOC recognizes and mentors civil society groups devoted to intercultural innovation in general and, specifically, promoting reconciliation (Post-Conflict Resource Center from Bosnia and Herzegovina) and nurturing friendship and addressing misperceptions between communities of different faiths (KI Volunteers, Philippines). Through the PEACEapp project, UNAOC conducts workshops on enhancing digital skills of young refugees, creating a platform for social inclusion and prevention of identity-based conflicts. In addition to the YSF, IIA, YPB, and PEACEApp, UNAOC continues to implement: 1) #SpreadNoHate initiative that aims at countering hate speech against

migrants and refugees in the media. The EU-UNAOC joint symposium took place in January 2017 and its key findings and recommendations will be followed up accordingly; 2) PLURAL+, a joint initiative of UNAOC and the IOM. In 2017, PLURAL+ will feature a new award for “Prevention of Xenophobia”; 3) Fellowship programme, sponsored by Germany, as well as Spain and partners on the ground.

UNAOC strengthened its collaboration with religious leaders believing in their ability to work with political leaders to avoid the use of divisive language and provide opportunities for an interfaith dialogue. UNAOC has recently sponsored the initiative of the Government of Spain – a Summit of Religious Leaders for Peace in the Middle East (Alicante, Spain). It has revamped partnership with the ONUART Foundation and is about to enter a new partnership agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China under the Belt and Road Initiative.

The High Representative informed participants that he plans to convene the 8th UNAOC Global Forum by the end of 2017 with the Focal Points meeting taking place on its margins. The venue and dates of the Forum will be announced as soon as consultations with member states are concluded.

In conclusion, the High Representative thanked donors, which provided contributions to the UNAOC Trust Fund in 2016 (Argentina, Azerbaijan, Finland, Germany, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Morocco, Oman, Portugal, Qatar, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey as well as the BMW Group), and those member states that provided in-kind support on the ground for the Fellowship programme (Morocco, Egypt, Qatar). The High Representative informed participants that the UNAOC cost plan for 2017 is USD 5.033MLN and he encouraged member states to provide donations as early in the calendar year as possible.

The Senior Adviser on Policy took the floor on behalf of the United Nations Secretary-General. She thanked the High Representative for convening the event and Turkey and Spain for their visionary leadership in establishing UNAOC as an invaluable initiative. The Adviser recalled that the Secretary-General’s priorities for the United Nations align with the UNAOC’s mission and that he has repeatedly called for greater political, cultural and economic investments in inclusivity and cohesion. Prioritizing the agenda of prevention, the Secretary-General aims to steer the United Nations to assist countries to avert the outbreaks of crises. He sees diversity as an integral asset to be nurtured and embraced for peace and prosperity. The Adviser recalled a wide range of the UNAOC’s programmes to address its mandate, including, awarding innovation, showing solidarity with youth, helping media to get the truth, encouraging young peacebuilders, adding international voice in condemning attacks on religious minorities and fostering understanding that crosses faith lines, as well as strengthening education for tolerance, fostering counter-responses to violence and hate crimes. The Adviser conveyed the Secretary-General’s wishes for UNAOC to succeed in its work and in spreading the spirit of solidarity around the world.

The Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support recalled the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on sustaining peace and the role of inclusive dialogue in sustaining peace and prevention. He also referred to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has a very strong emphasis on inclusivity and promises to “leave no one behind”. Reflecting on the main theme of the event, the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support emphasized that interreligious and intercultural dialogue honors the commitment of sustaining peace to the principle of inclusivity (including such groups as women and youth). The role of religious leaders and people of faith in promoting dialogue at local and national levels is crucially important, as reflected in the recently adopted Beirut Declaration. Furthermore, interreligious and intercultural dialogue means nurturing partnerships, including national and local actors. The Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support brought several examples from Burundi, Niger, Papua New Guinea and Libya to illustrate successful instances of local dialogue and reconciliation by community members. He also highlighted the work of the Peacebuilding Commission as a critical platform for dialogue, envisaged by the sustaining peace resolutions.

The Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations noted the significant progress achieved by UNAOC in terms of the scope of its activities as well as its supporters and outreach. UNAOC remains one of the most prominent peace initiatives of the current times and it

represents a genuine conflict prevention mechanism per se. Extremism, discrimination and xenophobia continue to persist and UNAOC has much to offer in order to address them by promoting its values. The concept of prevention and addressing the root causes of problems are being currently actively mainstreamed in the United Nations, which is the most cost-effective method, indeed. Intercultural and interreligious understanding can contribute to preventing conflicts, as perceptions cannot be formed or changed from one day to another. That is why education, programmes targeting youth, media in disseminating positive messages, programmes for inclusion of migrants in their new societies etc., will help diffuse tensions emanating from the current challenges. Projects focusing on intercultural and interreligious dialogue can also contribute to conflict management and post-conflict reconciliation processes. Turkey reiterated its determination to continue to extend its strong support to UNAOC.

The Ambassador at Large for the Alliance of Civilizations and for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue of Spain reminded participants that one in every two conflicts in the world have to do with cultural reasons and, therefore, cultural factors can be multipliers of conflicts. In this regard, we need to make sure that culture is not a problem, but rather a solution. Spain has made several proposals on activities related to the UNAOC's work, including, setting up a mediation team of experts in the field of intercultural and interreligious matters. Prevention of conflicts involves many stakeholders, and among them are youth and women. UNAOC is strong precisely because it works with a variety of players on the ground, regionally and internationally. It focuses its work, for example, on youth through its YPB and YSF programmes. The Ambassador noted a great value of the Summit of Religious Leaders for Peace in the Middle East, as referenced earlier by the High Representative. It was for the first time that the religious leaders from Israel and State of Palestine, who were initially opposed to the very idea, met publicly and issued a joint declaration, calling for peace and establishing a standing committee on practical implementation of the declaration.

Turkey and Spain, as co-sponsors of UNAOC, together with the UNAOC Secretariat, will work on an action plan to address the nowadays challenges, to be presented at the UNAOC Group of Friends ministerial meeting during the General Debate in Fall 2017. Valuable contributions of the members of the Group of Friends will be sought in this process.

Group of Friends: General Discussion

Reflecting on the main theme of the event and referencing the UNAOC's mandate and its activities, the following key points and recommendations have been made by the delegations:

- Participants commend and fully support the UNAOC's important role as a global platform for helping promote peace, understanding and cooperation among nations and develop more inclusive societies, in which diversity is recognized as an asset and value. The UNAOC's goals are fully aligned with the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Delegates thanked the High Representative for sharing the UNAOC activities report 2016 and outlining planned projects and initiatives in 2017.
- One of the delegations noted the alarming statistics for the proliferation of conflict, violent extremism and terrorism, with an increasing number of terrorist acts committed by individuals or small groups inspired, rather than directed, by terrorist organizations. Violent extremism has been the source of recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 member states to travel to areas of conflict and war. Therefore, an acknowledgement of failures and deficiencies in current policies is needed in order to define meaningful and purposeful policies and actions, assess the effectiveness of collective actions and the function of global institutions and alliances.
- Many speakers welcomed the appeal by the United Nations Secretary-General to place prevention at the top of the United Nations system agenda. In particular, they support the promotion of the concept of Sustaining Peace, which seeks to ensure a paradigm shift within the Organization in order to move from a reactive short-term model of conflict management to preventive long-term solutions. The *raison d'être* of UNAOC is closely linked with this

approach. UNAOC, through its specific projects on its four main pillars, namely, education, youth, media and migration, aims to create a culture of understanding at grassroots level by bringing together people from different cultures and religions. Its work contributes to the efforts during all stages of the conflict cycle.

- The UNAOC's areas of activities fall under Pillar 1 of the United Nations Global Counterterrorism Strategy. In view of the increased violent extremism and terrorist acts, UNAOC is yet to succeed in addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, and a deeper reflection and analysis of the realities is needed.
- The threat of terrorism and violent extremism affect all communities, with youth being the most vulnerable and innocent group targeted by extremists. Religious leaders may come together to condemn radicalism and terrorist acts stemming from it, fostering inclusive dialogue aimed at the prevention of radicalization and radical extremism, as well as countering the spread of xenophobia. When religious leaders are creatively and meaningfully engaged in peacebuilding efforts, they can be a significant source of strength and support for those efforts.
- Several existing international initiatives and bodies have been noted during the meeting, namely, 1) the MENA Regional Inter-religious Council of Religions for Peace; 2) the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, established as a collaborative effort between Finn Church Aid, OIC and Religions for Peace with the encouragement of the United Nations Mediation Support Unit and UNAOC; 3) the Muslim Council of Elders, hosted in the UAE.
- It has been noted that today media are primarily focusing on covering stories about interreligious tensions that had either ignited violent conflict or had been used to further fuel it. What are often not covered are stories about small, community-level efforts that are working to build bridges across different faiths and to find a path toward a common goal. In overall, information technology, internet and social media can provide an excellent outreach platform for societies and cultures to express and exchange different opinions and philosophies and exercise religious freedom with no fear.
- The role of women in conflict prevention, sustaining peace and preventive diplomacy has been highlighted by a number of speakers. Not only is it crucial to go beyond the protection of women and girls in conflict situations, but it is also important to put women's meaningful participation and leadership in decision-making processes at all levels to the heart of peacebuilding efforts, throughout the conflict cycle.
- Many delegations pointed out that dialogue starts with early education, in families and later at school. In this respect, it is important to develop educational systems that promote and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, including for strengthening the understanding of cultural diversity.
- Countering radicalization and discrimination, in view of several delegations, cannot be succeeded without supporting grassroots initiatives and civil society partnerships. UNAOC was advised to continue its outreach to civil society as a core element of its strategy.
- It has been noted that the international community should respect the differences among various religions and cultures and facilitate their dialogue and exchanges on an equal footing. Countries need to fully leverage critical functions of education and media, facilitate dialogue among different ethnic groups and promote understanding and tolerance of different religions and cultures.
- The event served as an opportunity to highlight successful examples of cooperation with UNAOC, namely:
 - As previously noted, the EU and UNAOC co-organized a symposium on Hate Speech Against Migrants and Refugees in the Media (Brussels, January 26 2017). A report has been drafted by

UNAOC and will be disseminated shortly. The European Commission and the Agency for Fundamental Rights will integrate its recommendations in their ongoing work, aimed to counter hate speech online and increase media literacy.

- Germany has pledged EURO 225,000 in support of the UNAOC Fellowship programme and reiterated its commitment to actively engage and partner with UNAOC. It noted that the global Alumni Network of the Fellowship programme is one of the greatest achievements of UNAOC. Its alumni have put together a wide variety of projects on preventing radicalization and xenophobia through education to be implemented in the future.
- To strengthen the existing coordination and cooperation, OIC and UNAOC are updating the Memorandum of Understanding and are drafting a new Plan of Action.
- Several delegations referred to the most recent and upcoming initiatives, noteworthy in the context of the event:
 - Peace and Stabilization Operations Programme, through which Canada works with allies and partners to help stop violence, provide security and space for dialogue and conflict resolution;
 - As a follow up to the General Assembly Resolution 65/5 of 2010, The Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science in Oman has organized Oman's Annual Rapprochement and Human Harmony Week. The Ministry of Religious Affairs of Oman holds an annual symposium on the development of religious studies, focusing on an intra-Islam dialogue between different sects, religious leaders and scholars;
 - Triennial Congresses of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, hosted by Kazakhstan;
 - Conference on Global Dialogues and Co-Existence After Polarization (Argentina, October 3-4 2016);
 - Meeting of the President of Burkina Faso with Pope Francis to discuss, among various issues, the role of Church in education (Vatican, October 19-20 2016);
 - High-Level Forum on Combating Anti-Muslim Discrimination and Hatred, led by the EU, Canada, USA and the OIC (UNHQs, January 17 2017);
 - Symposium on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue (Burkina Faso, March 3-7 2017);
 - Conference on Mutual Respect and Peaceful Coexistence as a Condition of Interreligious Peace and Stability: the Support of Christians and Members of Other Religions, co-organized by Armenia, Brazil, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Lebanon, Russian Federation, Serbia, Spain and Vatican (Geneva, March 7 2017);
 - 'Young Med Voices Plus' youth initiative, launched by the EU (Brussels, March 2017);
 - 4th World Forum on "Advancing Intercultural Dialogue: New Avenues for Human Security, Peace and Sustainable Development" (Azerbaijan, May 4-6 2017);
 - 4th Islamic Solidarity Games (Azerbaijan, May 12-22 2017);
 - Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (China, May 14-15 2017);
 - Germany is currently building a network under the theme "Responsibility of Religions for Peace"; a related conference will be held on May 21-23 2017 in Berlin;
 - Conference on Ethnic and Religious Violence in the Middle East will be hosted by Spain on May 24 2017, as a follow up to the open debate of the United Nations Security Council (March 5 2015) and the Paris Conference (September 15 2015).

Closing Session

The **United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations** thanked everyone for attendance and participation in the meeting. Delegations will receive a hard copy of the UNAOC activity report 2016 in May and invitations to the next Group of Friends Meeting, planned for Fall 2017 in the margins of the General Debate of the General Assembly.

Annex: List of Speakers

High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
Under Secretary-General and Senior Adviser on Policy
Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support
Turkey
Spain
Qatar
China
OIC
Kazakhstan
Germany
Guatemala
Iraq
Hungary
Oman
EU
Morocco
Iran
Argentina
Indonesia, on behalf of MIKTA
Philippines
Afghanistan
Armenia
Libya
El Salvador
Kyrgyzstan
UAE
Sudan
Bangladesh
Lebanon
Burkina Faso
AU
Russian Federation
Azerbaijan
Canada