



PANEL DISCUSSION ON “THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PEACEBUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST”

(Follow-up to the “Summit of Religious Leaders for Peace in the Middle East”,
Alicante, Spain, 14-16 November 2016)

Concept Note

Description of the Event

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) is organizing a panel discussion on “The Role of Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding in the Middle East”. The event will take place on 18 July 2017 at the United Nations headquarters, New York. The opening session will feature the United Nations Secretary-General, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Spain, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and three religious leaders representing the three monotheistic religions of the Holy Land – Muslim, Jewish and Christian.

The panel discussion will serve as a follow-up to the November 2016 Summit of Religious Leaders for Peace in the Middle East, held in Alicante, Spain - an initiative facilitated by the Spanish Government and co-sponsored by UNAOC.

The stability of the Middle East region is crucial to the peace and stability of the world. The fifty long years of the Arab-Israeli conflict have fueled cycles of violence and retribution. Moreover, the prolonged conflict has been misappropriated and exploited by extremist groups and elements.

In this context, religious leaders in the Holy Land play a key role in peacebuilding through promoting peaceful co-existence and tolerance as well as providing a counter-narrative to violent extremism.

Religious ideologies continue to carry great weight with a vast majority of people throughout the Middle East. For some, this may pose a challenge for peace and stability. But it may also provide an opportunity for a solution. As such, public discourse within and between Jewish and Muslim religious leaders who promote the culture of peace inherent in these religions, maybe a way forward to ease the political tension in the Holy land.

With such influence within their respective communities, religious leaders play a role in building trust and mutual understanding. They summon their communities to live in peace side by side in the Holy Land.

This initiative is based on the assumption that true peace between Israelis and Palestinians is possible when mutual trust exists between them. The goal of the initiative is to prepare the hearts and minds for true peace in the Middle East by involving religious leadership from both sides who voice a common message of peaceful coexistence as an essential element for building and sustaining peace.

Background: The Alicante Declaration

Religious leaders from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths met in Alicante & Madrid, Spain 14-16 November, 2016 with the objective of supporting peace and peaceful coexistence between the Israeli and Palestinian societies. The Summit was of special relevance since it was the first time that influential religious leaders from Israel and Palestine met together publicly. As a result of the debates, the religious leaders adopted a Declaration by consensus.

The Alicante Declaration emphasizes that religious leaders are responsible for promoting a life of mutual respect based upon justice and safety, recognizes the holiness of the Land for all three religions, declares that the violence that is conducted supposedly in the name of God is a debasement of faith. It calls for the cessation of incitement, misrepresentation and distortion of the image of the other. The religious leaders commit themselves to educate future generations to uphold mutual respect. They call for a solution that recognizes the right of the two peoples to exist with dignity. They declare that religious leaders bear a special responsibility to contribute to the desired peace and they urge the Israeli and Palestinian political leadership to work toward a solution. Finally, they agreed to establish a standing committee that will work to implement the principles of the declaration .

The Alicante Declaration was distributed to all UN Member States (*see Declaration attached*).

Objectives and Goals of the Alicante Process

The Alicante Process aims to facilitate the contribution of civil society to peace among Israelis and Palestinians:

- To make a call for peace in the Middle East and to support peaceful coexistence for two people living in the Holy Land, including the populations for whom religion and tradition are central in their identities.
- To strengthen dialogue among the religious leaders and contribute to build trust and peaceful coexistence.
- To promote mutual respect between people of all faiths in the Middle East.
- To stress the positive role of religious actors and their contribution to peacebuilding, acting as peacemakers, through the promotion of mutual understanding, respect and reconciliation and in this way contributing to conflict prevention and resolution.
- To counter extremist ideology and engage in a dialogue for peace and mutual respect.
- To prevent religion from being used as a source of conflict, and describe violence in the name of religion as the desecration of religion itself.
- To prevent incitement to hatred and violence.
- To promote respect for the holy sites of all faith communities and to counteract any expression of disrespect, desecration or abuse of holy sites. To recognize the religious attachments of each faith and call on their adherents to promote coexistence and reconciliation.
- To promote education of religious leaders and young people by cultivating a culture of peace and sending messages of mutual respect through social media.

Objective of the New York Panel Discussion:

The panel discussion on “The Role of Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding in the Middle East” will promote the goals of the Alicante Process. The religious leaders will present the actions that they are undertaking in order to implement the principles of the Alicante Declaration and will discuss concrete actions to foster their contribution to tolerance, mutual understanding, and the prevention of extremist ideology. Invitations were addressed to the Group of Friends of UNAOC and to rest of the United Nations member states.