



Addressing/Challenging Radicalisation and Extremism with Interfaith Dialogue for Peace: What works?

A Nizami Ganjavi International Center & Italian Society for International Organization Initiative for Global Dialogue in a Multipolar World

Rome, 26th - 28th of January 2016

"The accumulation of anger and rage is not necessarily connected to religion. It is a problem everywhere and radicalizers know how to capitalise on that." Ismail Serageldin, Director of the Library of Alexandria; Co-Chair of the Nizami Ganjavi International Centre.

"The responsibility of the West is to support the Islamic countries to build their own response to extremism. The West has been the one who has contributed to vast destabilisation." Massimo D'Alema, Prime Minister of Italy (1998-2000).

The context

The terrorist attacks in Beirut, Paris and elsewhere have underscored the worldwide sources and the global effects of religious radicalisation. With faith as a recurring rationale behind civil strife and political violence, religion is often considered an influential factor in international conflicts nowadays.

In the Middle East for instance, where strong cleavages are ripping societies apart and deepening their countries' distrust against each other, conflicts and political loyalties are coalescing around sectarian identities and extreme ideologies. Meanwhile, in Europe, the migration crisis has deepened the challenge of bridging the social and cultural gap between new entrants and native populations. The enduring inequalities between and within societies, which have been aggravated by the recent economic crisis, have shaken social trust and worsened the position of marginalised groups. We have witnessed populist and extremist movements exploiting and deepening the cultural gaps between natives and newcomers, very often by emphasising "cultural values", including religious identities. The fact that some migrants as well as their descendants have rallied around radical religious movements, travelling to the Middle East to fight or taking up violence against their adopted countries in the name of their faith, exacerbates the feeling that different — especially Islamic — faiths are a security threat not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe.



Problems today and the promise of a connected world

In this age of online videos and social media, cross-border extremism is deeply intertwined with the emergence of global channels of instant communication. And, with local customs and identities being increasingly exposed to global markets and foreign ideas, religious beliefs have emerged as powerful markers of identity and allegiance.

Many extremist groups have successfully used social media such as Twitter and YouTube to disseminate their ideology and attract tens of thousands of new recruits and sympathizers. Using the Internet, they can generate support not only from conflict-riven countries and marginalized corners of societies, but also from members of educated classes in developed countries, most notably young people across Europe. Such a reach demonstrates how powerful and pernicious extremist ideas can be when using new technologies.

In today's world, where civil society and social media are tightly interwoven and therefore play an unprecedented role in shaping public opinion, those new technologies and global channels of instant communication also create an enormous opportunity to foster a greater common understanding amongst manifold cultures in order to generate peace. As a result, social media may amplify the impact of interfaith dialogue and empower it to play a key role in easing international tensions and countering extremist ideologies. This begs, of course, the question of the role of the State on the one side, and that of the frontiers of free expression on the other.

Interweaving faith and political dialogue

Nowadays, political leaders are constantly facing the question of how to accommodate political dialogue within global efforts towards fostering stability, mutual understanding and respect. Too often, these efforts have seen to be disconnected, to proceed along different logics rather than to join forces. As Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union points out: *"Religion plays a role in politics—not always for good, not always for bad. Religion can be part of the process. What makes the difference is whether the process is democratic or not."*¹

Drawing on faith to bridge different cultures and reinforce the values that unite humanity is key to overcoming political differences and counter extremism in all its forms.

The ability of religion to reconcile and create peace has been shown by many leaders in this world, including Desmond Tutu's call to faith-based values to campaign for human rights against discrimination and champion efforts to alleviate poverty and HIV/AIDS. Indeed, as the world faces enormous common challenges, such as that of climate change and the need to fundamentally change existing production and consumption habits, common spiritual values are a powerful potential source of inspiration and unity.

¹ Federica Mogherini's remarks at "Call to Europe V: Islam in Europe", FEPS conference" 25.6.2015



Towards a Better Understanding for a Peaceful Coexistence of Religions

It is in this context that, at the 2015 Baku Forum, Abdulaziz Altwajiri, Director General of ISESCO, called for an ‘alliance of civilizations’, which would be based on a simple premise: accepting the other without negation. In shaping a peaceful world order, religion and interfaith dialogue can prove useful in further promoting understanding between cultures and heritages.

In order to engage influential leaders in the effective development of policies that foster interfaith dialogue, *the Nizami Ganjavi International Centre* & Italian Society for International Organization is convening a high-level meeting of 30 eminent guests—among which current and former presidents, prime ministers and renowned academics from the East and West as well as religious leaders—in Rome, Italy.

Here, we will address the pivotal question of what can be learned from past and present practices of interfaith dialogue in order to discuss the way and advise on how international policymakers can elevate interfaith dialogue as a genuine instrument for conflict prevention and fostering international peace.

In this landmark meeting, we will thus reflect upon the following questions:

- What can be learned about faith-based conflict and peace? Which factors should be taken into account by leaders in global governance?
- Is there a genuine possibility to initiate an interfaith dialogue as a way to prevent radicalisation? What can international leaders do to make it work?
- (How) can religion bridge cultures and nations in a common understanding of shared values?
- (How) can government leaders help/serve the global search of common spiritual values?
- What is the role of women and gender in processes of interfaith dialogue?
- (How) can young religious people worldwide become messengers of peace instead of foot soldiers in faith-based conflicts?
- What are the concrete steps governments should take to overcome divisions, and through which kind of interfaith dialogue—if any?

“Success in interfaith dialogue is only possible if we avoid condemnation and promote acceptance.” Abdulaziz Altwajiri, Director General of ISESCO



AGENDA OF THE MEETING

26th January:

Arrival of participants

Welcome dinner with keynote address

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

27th of January

Italian Senate

10:00 **Responding to radicalisation and extremism through interfaith dialogue:**

Opening Ceremony

Venue: Italian Senate

- **Pietro Grasso**, President of the Italian Senate;
- **Giorgio Napolitano**, President of Italy (2006-2015);
- **Franco Frattini**, MFA of Italy (2002-2004; 2008-2011), President SIOI;
- **Rosen Plevneliev**, President of the Republic of Bulgaria;
- **Gjorge Ivanov**, President of the Republic of Macedonia;
- **Vaira Vike-Freiberga**, President of Latvia (1999-2007) & Co-Chair NGIC;
- **Ismail Serageldin**, Director Library of Alexandria & Co-Chair NGIC.

Guiding points/questions for speakers/discussants:

- What are the socioeconomic factors of radicalisation (poverty, marginalisation, absence of a strong, secular identity), and what can religion and interfaith dialogue offer to alleviate those hardships.
- The actors of interfaith dialogue: only religious authorities or secular authorities as well? What legitimacy? What frameworks?
- The importance of a single location to dialogue: promoting the building of “Houses of One”² (housing a synagogue, a church and a mosque under the same roof—pilot project in Berlin, currently raising the necessary funds) in each country.
- The role of public policies in enabling and fostering interfaith dialogue.
- The necessity to rethink “national identity” so that it is more inclusive and less divisive, but also “secularism” so as to shelter political regimes from any influence from one or several religions.
- The benefit possibility of writing a common book compiling shared values on humanity and faith, on acceptance and respect by leaders from all major religions (without any zealotry), which would serve as the basic guide for interfaith dialogue.
- Support given to international organisations (e.g. “Religions for Peace”) or international summits (e.g. “G20 Interfaith Summit”)

² <http://house-of-one.org/en> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27872551>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/thehouseofone/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61O5cjQTfco>

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international mediation and dialogue



11:30

Conflict and Peace within Religions: What should political leaders learn from History that is relevant to today's issues?

Venue: Italian Senate

Keynote speaker:

- **Emil Constantinescu**, President of Romania (1996-2000)
- **Bronislaw Komorowski**, President of Poland (2010-2015)
- **Ivo Josipovic**, President of Croatia (2010-2015)
- **Abdulaziz Altwaiji**, Director General ISESCO
- **Paul Bhatti**, Former Minister of National Harmony, Pakistan

Guiding points/questions for speakers/discussants:

- Beyond Judaism, Christianity and Islam—What is the stance on conflict and peace of Hinduism; Buddhism; Taoism; Confucianism; Shinto; African traditional faiths (Bantu, Zulu, etc.)?
- Parallel between today's and yesterday's issues (see the dispute between Catholics and Protestants in France during the XVIth century; between Sunnis and Shias before the XXth century in Iraq, Persia, South Asia): were the factors of radicalisation and violence the same (socioeconomic)?
- Does History *actually* repeat itself? Therefore, are the solutions of the past relevant to the present (and further, to the future)? If not, how should political leaders provide effective solutions to faith-based issues?

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch with keynote speaker

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

14:30 – 16:00 The sources of radicalisation and violent extremism—how does religion fit in?

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

Speakers:

- **Vaira Freiberga**, President of Latvia (1999-2007), Co-Chair NGIC
- **Amre Moussa**, Secretary General, Arab League (2001-2011)
- **Iveta Radicova**, Prime Minister of Slovakia (2010-2012)
- **Rexhep Meidani**, President of Albania (1997-2002)
- **Stjepan Mesic**, President of Croatia (2000-2010)

Guiding questions/points for consideration:

- Is Religion a source of violence/radical thoughts, is it responsible for radicalisation, or is it merely a cover/tool used by radicals/extremists to provide an intelligible narrative to their recruits in order to manipulate them and to provide a meaning to their sacrifice?
- New technologies and social media as tools to convince, convert and recruit: what can governments do to avoid those being used by radicals and extremists? How can religious leaders use the same tools to pass along messages of peace, religious interpretation of and solutions to the difficult situations in which marginalised people find themselves? How can



- religious communities unite to provide solidarity to those of their communities in need (e.g. community-based initiatives: help for children with school issues; micro-loans; provision of healthcare, etc.)?
- Teaching Religion/religions (history and doctrine) at school: a necessity or a danger? How to do it?
 - The case of prison detainees and their rehabilitation: avoiding the influence of “bad” preachers who distort the teaching of a religion by being present in prisons // Making prisons safe from radicals/extremists and from radicalised religious ideas. Also, can religion teach governments and peoples to actually *forgive* and *rehabilitate* those who acted against the law but redeemed themselves?
 - The ‘meaning of life’: in a materialistic world, without different pillars/markers, can religious leaders provide an intelligible ethical path, a readable philosophy of life, to increase stability?

5:00 PM Reception hosted by His Excellency **Mr. Sergio Mattarella**, President of the Italian Republic

Venue: Quirinale Palace

20:30 Gala Dinner by the Nizami Ganjavi International Center

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

Remarks by:

- **Vaira Vike-Freiberga**, President of Latvia (1999-2007), Co-Chair NGIC
- **Nazim Ibrahimov**, Minister of Diaspora, Azerbaijan
- **Ismail Serageldin**, Director Library of Alexandria & Co-Chair NGIC.

28th of January

9:00 – 10:30 **Interconnectivity and the global search for spirituality. What is society looking for and what is the role of the State?**

Venue: Italian Senate

Speakers:

- **Ismael Seragedin**, Director, Library of Alexandria and Co-Chair NGIC;
- **Valdis Zatler**, President of Latvia (2007-2011)
- **Petar Stoyanov**,

Guiding questions/points for consideration:

- Is interconnectivity increasing or decreasing the need for faith?



Is this interconnectivity an unprecedented opportunity for religious communities to connect, unite and expand? Should governments encourage/help or prevent such endeavours? How?

Can the State be useful in delivering on material means towards spiritual ends? Is it equipped to do so? If not, what would be necessary for it to deliver on such a search? What is the future of secularism: more or less?

- The role of religious authorities: using new technologies, interconnectivity and social media to “spread the good word”

11:00 – 12:30 Balance: The role of gender and young people in radicalisation and extremism. Inclusion and Exclusion in interfaith dialogue.

Venue: Italian Senate

Speakers:

- **Linda Lazillotta**, Vice President of Italian Senate;
- **Albrecht Freiherr von Boeselager**, Grand Chancellor of the Sovereign Order of Malta;
- **Petru Lucinschi**, President of Moldova 1997-2001;
- **Hikmet Cetin**, MFA of Turkey 1991-1994.

Guiding questions/issues for consideration:

- What is the legitimacy of male-dominated religious elites in tackling the issue of women/gender in interfaith dialogue with the goal for greater tolerance and generating more peace? Can interfaith dialogue and the involvement of women within the latter be a way for religion hierarchies to reform and start including more women within its elite circles?
Challenges: under-representation of women in religious elites—how can this be overcome? The ‘inferior’ role given to women in some religious literature—how to change it?
- The main victims of faith-based terrorism as well as the main perpetrators are usually under 30: what are governments actually doing to prevent the radicalisation of young people? What are religious communities doing?
- What can ‘seniors’ do to support ‘juniors’? How can young people be involved in interfaith dialogue? Should they? If so/not, why? What kind of alternatives do exist for the young ones to play a role in the fight against radicalisation and violent extremism?
- What solutions (from political/religious elites) to indoctrination of young people?

12:30 – 14:00 Lunch

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

14:00 – 15:30 We are One: Statements from leaders of all faith on the role of religion in building world peace.

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva



Speakers:

- **Zlatko Lagumdzija**, Prime Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2001-2002)
- **Yahya Pallavicini**, Vice President, COREIS Islamic Religious Community, Italy

Religious leaders provide a personal account on how religion and interfaith dialogue can promote peace.

15:30 – 16:00 **Conclusions and next steps, possible signature of common declaration.**

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

18:00 audience with **His Holiness Pope Francis** (TBC)

20:30 Dinner

Venue: Grand Hotel de la Minerva

“The need for an important dialogue is evident, and must be based on a desire to explore the commonalities between all religions.” Emil Constantinescu, President of Romania (1996-2000)

PS: on 28th January time of the meeting with His Excellency Paolo Gentiloni, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Republic to be confirmed.