

NATO
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Centre of Excellence



RELIGION
& SECURITY
COUNCIL

Report of the Seminar on “Religion, Peace,
and Security: challenges and prospects
in the MENA region”

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STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FROM THE STUDY SEMINAR “RELIGION, PEACE, AND SECURITY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE MENA REGION”

1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of May 2022, the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE), together with the Religion & Security Council, hosted the study seminar “Religion, Peace, and Security: Prospects in the MENA Region”. The seminar was held in Rome and gathered a wide range of prestigious speakers and participants coming from numerous institutions and thematic as well as geographic areas. The aim of the discussion was to shed light on the specific and significant contribution that religion can provide in building peace and security, a contribution that has for a long time been disregarded or even rejected. The idea that religion could play a positive and constructive role in the development of peace and security has not been taken into consideration, neither in terms of strategic thinking, nor at an operational level. Indeed, the use of religion in a security context is often considered a taboo, even to this day. Such a mindset produced a ‘lack of awareness’ of the potentialities of religions as an asset in the field of crisis management, conflict res-



olution, peace-building, and post-conflict stabilisation.

The aim of the event was to participate in the recent, but still limited and criticised, movement within academic and governance institutions which considers religion in a constructive way. The seminar was divided into three main sessions: The first session focused on the pacifying potentialities of interreligious dialogue; The second session addressed the Islamic ethics, interpretations, doctrines and speeches promoted to counter Islamist extremism; And, finally, the third session dealt with the issue of religious pluralism and peaceful coexistence.

For the scope of this seminar the concept of religion was intended as the definition developed by the German sociologist Durkheim: “A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sa-



Image 1. Plenary session.



Image 2. Mr. Emiliano Stornelli (Chairman RSC), Col. Massimo Di Pietro (NATO SFA CoE Director), Dr. Sihem Djebbi Associate Professor, University of Sorbonne Paris Nord).

cred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” The following definition highlights the several constituting features that make religion both an individual and collective phenomenon, as well as a spiritual and pragmatic socio-political one. This enabled the participants to explore the many dimensions of religion and to identify which aspects of religion have the potential to play a role in fostering peace processes.

The aim of this paper is to provide the reader with an in-depth understanding of the discussions that took place during the study seminar and to provide a baseline for further conversations regarding the nexus between religion, peace, and security in today’s world.

Furthermore, it will conduct an analysis of how SFA can play an active role in achieving specific objectives recommended by the speakers of each session.

1.1 Defining Interreligious Dialogue:

In order to fully understand the topics that will be discussed in this section of the paper, one must first understand the meaning of “dialogue” and contextualise it to the relevant topic of religion and cooperation. For that reason, we will explore the meaning of the term. To do this, we will rely on the definition given by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID): “A form of interaction between two or more individuals of different identities that emphasises self-expression and where each party strives to use active, empathetic and non-judgmental listening in a compassionate spirit of openness and understanding” (KAICIID, 2021).

Dialogue has many characteristics and benefits that make it one of the best tools actors can use to achieve a peaceful outcome, although it can also be quite tricky and difficult to accomplish. When successful, it has been very effective in peace-making initiatives,

building inclusive communities and changing the culture as well as behaviour of an organisation in order to fit the needs of all actors (KAICIID, 2021). Indeed, the aim of Interreligious dialogue is to create mutual understanding and respect between faiths, create connections based on trust, and assist in solving disagreements. It is important to note that it is NOT a way to discuss which belief is better, nor is it an effort to convert individuals (KAICIID, 2021).

2. STUDY SEMINAR:

2.1 Interreligious Dialogue in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

Peaceful dialogue has been an extremely difficult objective to achieve for actors involved in conflicts within the Middle Eastern and North African region. Indeed, they are often difficult to achieve, but they offer a great opportunity of prospect for peace for all the participating communities. Therefore, one could argue that it is in the involved actors' best interest to engage in such discussions. Indeed, Interreligious dialogue in conflict resolution and peace-building – the main topic discussed during the first panel of the study seminar, as well as this section of the paper – was a major talking point and saw a lot of interventions by academics and military officers alike that were present at the seminar. This section of the paper will concentrate on

the presentations given by two scholars – Dr Elie Al Hindy, and Dr Majeda Omar – who discussed the strengths, as well as the necessity, for interreligious dialogues as it needs to be the main driving force for conflict resolution and peace-building.

The first speaker who presented at the study seminar was, as previously mentioned, Dr Elie Al Hindy. He is an associate professor at Notre Dame University Louaize and Director of the Middle East Institute for Research and Strategic Studies, where he discussed the role of religion and its uses within peace-building dialogues in the current socio-political world in the Middle Eastern and North African region. Dr Al Hindy explains how religion within politics and international affairs is becoming increasingly significant due to identity-based conflicts, many of which can easily be found in the MENA region, and the separation of religion in political discussions. This division has alienated many groups, which, as a result, heightened extremist feelings of nationalism, condoned war-waging and terrorist tactics. In order to find a working solution to this pressing issue, Dr Al Hindy discusses the three necessary levels of a successful interreligious dialogue: 1) Political level, through the promotion of inclusive citizenship; 2) Theological/Religious level, through the promotion of alternative religious narratives; and 3) Social level, through the promotion of religious social responsibility.



Image 3. Dr Elie Al Hindy, associate professor at Notre Dame University Louaize and Director of the Middle East Institute for Research and Strategic Studies.

THE POLITICAL LEVEL

This aims at the promotion of inclusive citizenship. In other words, it strives to achieve social and political equality for all citizens in a manner that promotes democratic representation. It is important to note that equality before the law, as well as equal dignity and rights to all humans, is necessary but not sufficient. Furthermore, there is no “one size fits all” democracy – something that historically the western world has tried to push for – but rather it is necessary to promote a complex, yet unique democratic system which is adapted to the wants and needs of the target society.

THE THEOLOGICAL/RELIGIOUS LEVEL

This dimension tries to promote alternative narratives in relation to religious faiths, in order to teach extremist actors other points of view and open a discussion to regain peaceful coexistence and, when possible, prevent individuals from becoming extremist altogether. Inter-faith dialogue provides alternative dialogues and interpretations which try and promote mutual acceptance and respect. This promotes the idea that two (or more) religions can peacefully coexist without the need to resort to violence. Furthermore, this also changes the narrative of religion from destructive and alienating, to constructive and inclusive by building upon common values, concerns, and interests.

THE SOCIAL LEVEL

Finally, the social level aims at reforming society and the social responsibility surrounding religions. To further elaborate, this tries to tackle the problem from the source by promoting social accountability from institutions and leaders, as well as by re-humanising religion. Fur-

thermore, it also tries to address the social, economic, and ethical challenges of their respective communities.

If effectively applied together, these three dimensions of reform become the building blocks of a new state building framework. This structure attempts to prevent states from failing and empowers them in a way where they become the main providers of (national) security, be it physical and/or social.

Following Dr Elie Al Hindy's presentation, Dr Majeda Omar – the director of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan – also contributed to the panel by giving a rather insightful presentation. Her presentation was more on the practical side (for the most part), as opposed to Dr Al Hindy's which concentrated on the theoretical, but the two speeches highly complimented each other for this reason, providing the listeners with much food for thought on future possibilities in terms of conflict resolution.

Dr Omar stressed the role of religion as a tool for conflict resolution, more specifically referring to the use of Interreligious dialogues which motivate people to achieve justice and reconciliation. She argues that there is a fundamental connection between religion, dignity of life, peace, and justice. In order to achieve this type of dialogue, a few criteria must be met. Indeed, simply recognising other theological beliefs is not enough to achieve acceptance, but one must recognise the legitimacy of another's truth. Only then can people who are engaged in Interreligious dialogues be ready to fully understand people of other religious traditions, as well as achieving humility, comprehension, patience, and respect. “To speak of co-existence is to speak of shared values as in respect, responsibility and altruism, which have helped to ensure humanity's survival and well-being from ancient times” (Omar, 2022).



Image 4. Dr Majeda Omar, Director of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan.

The Middle East is a region with a rich history of coexistence between different sects and religions. In fact, Dr Omar argues that many people defend Islam's role in fostering peace and principles like respect, empathy, and mutual understanding. To further promote this thought, the Amman Message was an initiative that started in 2004 which explains what Islam is and what it symbolizes, proclaiming what Islam is and is not, as well as which behaviours reflect it, and which do not. Furthermore, it aims to share a vision of openness, tolerance, humanism, and mutual respect. Education of religious discourses are essential for comprehending coexistence and dealing with the problem of radicalization.

2.2 ADDRESSING RADICAL THINKING AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Today's media coverage is filled with events regarding the crisis of interreligious dialogue, the rise of extremism and radicalism, and the issue of terrorism in many parts of the world, especially in the MENA region. The heavy presence of these topics should remind us of the

importance of the nexus between security and religion and the need for more in-depth and open discussions in order to jointly face these issues. According to a number of experts, a crucial point in the rise of violent extremism is the increase of the means of communication implemented by radical groups, and therefore the expansion of the radical narrative. Over the course of the years, dozens of websites, newsletters, videos and videogames have been developed conveying a violent and extremist narrative, thus influencing a significant part of the world's population. New media have become a pivotal tool in the proliferation of violent extremism. Therefore, providing strong alternative narratives is crucial the battle against the rise of these phenomena.

The second day of the study seminar opened with a session on 'Addressing radical thinking and violent extremism' which comprised two panellists, Prof. Aicha Haddou, Director of the Ta'ruf Center - Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Center, and Imam Yahya Pallavicini of the Comunità Religiosa Islamica (COREIS) Italiana. Both speakers have provided

extensive expertise in their respective field of work and shared valuable insights and examples on how to counter the issue of radical thinking and violent extremism in today's world.



Image 5. Prof. Aicha Haddou, Director of the Ta'ruf Center - Morocco Interfaith & Peacebuilding Research and Training Center.

Prof. Aicha Haddou presented Morocco's strategy to prevent religious extremism which is based on a specific nexus between security, prevention of radicalism and religious diplomacy. The Kingdom's strategy comprises security-based measures, such as the establishment of the Central Office for Judiciary Investigation, as well as measures aimed at reconstructing the religious domain and the creation of entities dedicated to religious training. The strategy has put great effort into reforming religious teaching, as well as promoting a major female representation within religious structures. Furthermore, a lot of emphasis has been placed on the role of Mosques and the training of imams and preachers. The Moroccan strategy is both domestic and international, meaning that the efforts are oriented towards the population living in Morocco as well as towards the Moroccans living abroad. With

regards to the latter, the policy intervenes in the training of imams and the network of religious representatives active in Europe through institutions like the European Council of Moroccan Ulemas.

Prof. Haddou She went on to provide an in-depth explanation of the activities and programmes carried out by the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas, an institute created in 2006, which is present across the Moroccan territory thanks to a network of units including numerous research centres. The institute's main is to spread a «middle Way» Islam (wasatiyyah Islam) and its relating set of values, as well as to contain risky behaviors and to prevent the spread of a radical religious interpretation and discourse, which are at odds with the majoritarian Islamic trends. In order to achieve this objective, the institute has developed numerous research programs, research-actions and projects, including an online platform containing pluri-linguistic theological videos in order to provide alternative discourses, comics in Arabic, video-sharing and seminars.

In addition, in collaboration with the General Delegation to the penitentiary administration and rehabilitation and the National Council of Human Rights, the institute has participated in the implementation of an innovative program of 'reconciliation' in order to combat violent extremism in prisons. The program aims at sensitising convicts incarcerated in Moroccan prisons, by offering them an alternative discourse in order to fight against violent extremism and terrorism. Detainees are challenged to think about the worldview they have constructed and are taught how to acknowledge other discourses. Once they have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills, a number of them become 'peers' and are given the chance to train and sensitise their fellow inmates. The initiative is part of a larger project which focuses on the reconciliation, rehabilitation and

resocialisation of prisoners who have been accused of terrorism. Furthermore, it proposes training to prison directors and prison employees which focuses on tolerance. Through this project, many detainees have attended a new theological program which focuses on moderate approaches to Islam. This program is partly implemented in cooperation with the Japanese government and with the United Nations Development Program.

Crucial activities to counter violent extremism are also carried out by the institute's Centre of Study and Research in the Field of Values which is a unit specialised in the struggle against risky behaviour. The centre implements proximity activities, such as the implementation of round tables targeting the youth dealing with current affairs and risky behaviours. The center also organizes sensitisation events on specific issues arranged in strategic places, such as professional training centres, youth centres, women centres, prisons and higher education centres. Furthermore, the research centre has created an interactive website which operates as a space where youth, broader society and religious leaders are able to connect. The website comprises a TV channel, videos, interviews and on-line training sessions. Another main center linked with the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas is the Ta'aruf Center, a peace-building research center working on different programs focusing on peace and non-violence teaching.

Prof. Aicha Haddou's intervention clearly highlighted the need for and the effectiveness of new and creative means of communication in countering the radical narratives that have transpired over the years. Furthermore, she argued that a clear policy focusing on education (specifically peer-education), positive psychology, women and youth is key in fighting radical thinking and violent extremism in today's world.



Image 6. Imam Yahya Pallavicini of the Comunità Religiosa Islamica (COREIS) Italiana.

Imam Yahya Pallavicini's intervention on the other hand, focused on providing an overview of how, over the last twenty years, Islamic Institutions have addressed the radical narrative and propaganda by trying to study and manage policies against violent extremism. He did so by presenting and commenting on the selected documents as well as the involvement of international Muslim scholars and religious leaders in order to stress the value of intra-faith coordination and interreligious consultation. His starting point was the 2004 Amman Message, produced by the Kingdom of Jordan, which provides answers to three overarching questions: 'Who is a Muslim?'; 'Is it permissible to declare someone an apostate?'; 'Who has the right to undertake issuing fatwas, i.e. legal rulings?'. He continued by presenting a number of documents, including the 2007 Common Word, the 2014 Open Letter to al-Baghdadi, the 2015-2017 UN Plan

of Action for Religious Leaders, the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration and the 2019 Charter of Makkah. According to the Imam, there is a significant need for intra-faith coordination, i.e. between different religions, in order to produce counter-narratives, as well as interreligious consultations. Furthermore, he stressed the value of regional and international cooperation and inter-institutional empowerment, i.e. close coordination between secular and religious as well as national and local entities.

Although the two speakers addressed the topic of radical thinking and violent extremism from different angles by basing them on their personal knowledge and experience, a number of elements were stressed by both of them. Firstly, there is a significant need to provide alternative narratives to counter the discourses inciting radicalism and violence. Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen the collaboration between traditional and new media in order to make the most of the means of communication at our disposal. Thirdly, the importance of investing in education, especially in peer-education, and capacity-building of religious and secular institutions is important.

According to Prof. Aicha Haddou, education is the most powerful weapon against extremism. Fourthly, there is a need to focus on women and youth as they are the main victims of violent extremism and therefore have a key role to play in the fight against this phenomenon. Furthermore, both speakers stressed the importance of an effective engagement between international and regional partners as well as the exchange of lessons learned and best practices. Lastly, a key recommendation is to invest in interreligious dialogue with humility by taking into consideration both the differences and the similarities in order to find common ground and strive for peaceful coexistence.

2.3 HOW TO FOSTER RECONCILIATION AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE: BEST POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Many countries in the MENA region have been overwhelmed by conflicts, uprisings and violent extremism. Local societies are becoming increasingly fragmented and polarised along racial and ethnic identities. Minority communities often pay the price for this predicament in the form of sectarian discrimination, which is exacerbated by the government and internal corruption. This certainly contributes to undermining the legitimacy of institutions of and state building processes. Thanks to the intervention of Dr Elie Abouaoun, director of Middle East and North Africa Programs and of the Regional Hub in Tunisia at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), as well as Senior Fellow of the Religion & Security Council (RSC) and Dr Pascale Isho Warda, President of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organisation, we explored the efforts that were made in several key countries in the MENA region addressing the best policies and what are the approaches that should be adopted to foster reconciliation and peaceful coexistence that also require the international community's cooperation.

"Food for thought" was the title chosen by Dr Elie Abouaoun for his presentation focusing on a comprehensive analysis regarding four specific countries: Tunisia, Iraq, Libya and Lebanon. To answer the question of why the region is characterised by conflicts, uprisings, and social inequality, he first noted that there is a misconception of inclusivity in the MENA region that has developed through time as a result of various political concussions that precede the Ottoman empire. This was followed by a historical analysis that touched upon several weaknesses that continue to affect the region today: From the Ottoman Empire's "divide and rule" strategy, to France and

Britain's colonial power and ambition to build a nation state at any cost, to the emergence of pan-Arab nationalism and political Islam, which left communities which still identified with religious, ethnic, tribal, or other affiliations. Furthermore, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, there was a period of great warfare resulting in the polarisation in both political and emotional spheres, as well as a drastic shift in priorities. Then followed the cold war ideology in the 1950s and 1960s, with coups and dictatorships, false protection of ethnic and religious groups, and the endorsement of Jihadism. Later, from 2000 to 2011, a new international order emerged, marked by the breakdown of parliamentary democracy and increased violence

in the area which was saturated by the events of 9-11.

Regarding the challenges of Tunisia's political transition, he mentioned the famous and successful national dialogue in 2013 between Islamists and Secularists ending a period of national war. However, the temporary power-sharing system, used to mitigate the conflict, is lasting too long. This is affecting the functioning of political institutions. Moreover, the economic stalemate is worsening, exacerbating the regional divide as coastal areas have been favoured over the internal ones. After 2019, the election of President Kais Saied, represented the impact of a global/generational refusal against "political establishments".



Image 7. Dr Elie Abouaoun, Director of Middle East and North Africa Programs and of the Regional Hub in Tunisia at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP).

Things are somewhat different in Iraq; where one of the common misconceptions is that extremism began after 2003. When looking at Iraq's history, however, this is not the case. In fact, radicalism originated before 2003, while Saddam Hussein manipulated it, and it flourished after 2003, thanks to the De-Baathification process, which excluded the Sunni population from Iraq's bureaucracy and political processes. During the post-ISIS era, we assisted to the creation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) that lead the military control of the country. The PMF behavior made minority groups more vulnerable. The existence of competition between sub-national identities, where an individual must choose between a perceived mutually exclusive national and subnational affiliation, and the blurred lines between political and

religious spheres, are among the most critical challenges to overcome.

Dr Elie Abouaoun identified 2011 as a turning point in Libya. Ghaddafi's inverted pyramid model, which was designed to empower people, has failed. The line between local and national roles was becoming increasingly blurred and a gap between community, political decision-making and authoritarian regimes raised to the extent of exclusion of minorities (ethnic and linguistic), resulting in greater inequity. Following 2011, there was a rush to have elections and draft a constitution without considering the lack of a social contract, which resulted in failure. The pressing struggle for resources amidst chaotic governance and the exclusion of minorities led to regional interferences.



Image 8. Hon. Pascale Isho Warda, President of Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO) and Former Minister of Immigration and Displacement in Iraq.

On the other hand, most of Lebanon's problems are blamed on diversity and power sharing. There are misconceptions about sectarianism and quota systems that neglect systemic issues like exclusion and harmful social practices. Corruption is particularly ignored, not just in the public sector, but also in the private sector and it is on the verge of becoming a social norm. There is a perpetuation of unequal representation and political marginalisation which exacerbates lack of transparency in government and social isolation. The subnational identities exist and are still very strong compared to the national ones, but nothing has been done to address this issue. For a sustainable environment and peaceful coexistence, there must be the complementarity between national and subnational identity must be highlighted and acknowledged.

To conclude, the speaker offers a number of suggestions for fostering reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, including: restoring trust in political systems, as people have lost faith in political entities and have begun to develop individualism; the need to prioritise structural socio-economic relations, as it is difficult to persuade people to think about social contracts and political governance if they continue to live in social and economic inequalities; recognize the difference between local and national political roles, define the role of religious leaders, promote inclusive citizenship, and encourage local/accountable government. To formulate an inclusive set of values, we must overcome identity-based approaches with cause-oriented ones. This can help to develop a long-term suitable environment for peaceful coexistence. The EU and the United States continue to play a key role in the MENA region as partners in reviving liberal values through soft power. Partnerships should be formed based on shared ideals through diplo-

macy and education rather than purely financial interests.

H.E. Pascale Isho Warda, President of Hammurabi Human Rights Organisation and Former Minister of Immigration and Refugees in Iraq intervened during the second part of the panel.

She emphasised the significance of the seminar as an opportunity to collaborate in the defence and maintenance of international security in order to foster peaceful coexistence among nations and preserve freedom in the face of the escalation of violence that many regions, particularly Iraq, have experienced throughout history. She started by performing an analysis of Iraq, focusing on the main factors that have contributed to an increase in violence, extremism, and terrorism in the country, in order to propose some solutions to mitigate the negative repercussions.

As for geographical historical factors, territorial diversity has resulted in social heterogeneity as most of the population was concentrated in the fertile areas along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers differing in customs and traditions from populations residing in other areas. In the face of such social inhomogeneity, governments were unable to grasp such religious and ethnic nuances. More than that, Iraqis came to believe that the authority in charge of the country, no matter how it came to power, was not better than what preceded it, which people had rejected. For example, the American invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime on April 9th, 2003, failed to satisfy the population due to a number of factors including the Iraqi constitution, which established ethnicity and sectarianism, political quotas, increased administrative corruption, and the seizure of power by armed forces over economic articulations, over which the central state had completely lost control. Several conflicts

that Iraq experienced during its history, like against Iran (1981-1988), the occupation of Kuwait (1991) and the invasion of 2003, have had an impact on the political and the social sphere.

We witnessed the deterioration of living conditions of families, the decline of the sanitary system, the narrowing of job opportunities and the weakness of official and unofficial means of social control, which gave way to various forms of violence, delinquency and crime. The less fortunate, who have suffered the burden of such war repercussions, like the homeless, the displaced, the unwell and the imprisoned, are pushed to the outskirts of society since they lack the capacity to comply with society's norms. Another source of violence and extremism is the deterioration of the educational system, which is caused by a lack of buildings, and results in more than 50 students per class. About 1000 schools are made of mud, straw, tents, or caravans and they lack clean water and sanitary toilets, as well as technical inputs such as laboratories, libraries, and equipment. H.E. Warda stated that the level of teacher training is worsening; teachers and students are being displaced, and violence in schools is increasing, with students being beaten.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and shall act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood". As quoted, we are all born with the right to freedom; as a result, authorities must preserve human rights by providing essential services to countries in war, such as Iraq. Furthermore, based on this article, it is feasible to preserve religious freedom while still establishing long-term peace and stability in society. The Middle East and North Africa, and indeed the entire globe, must follow this path.

Most of the countries in the MENA region lack basic concepts of justice and equality as mechanisms to reject racial and religious discrimination, and also lack visions and strategies based on the concept of common good. The main objectives to be achieved in the construction of concrete strategies and policies are the protection and preservation of the rights of people without any sort of act by authorities, except by law, the right to freedom and the stabilisation of a peaceful environment. The moral base to foster reconciliation, freedom, peace and security is based on the rejection of all forms of abuses or violence regarding discrimination of minorities and the promotion of the protection of human rights at the national, regional and international levels.

In March 2021, the visit of Pope Francis to Iraq was seen as a hope for change. Iraqi reactions were unique since they discovered a new reality where the possibility of coexistence of diversities was reflected in the words of the pope who said "You are all brothers" asking for a dialogue and exchange of love rather than armies. All of this bears witness to the nature of the Iraqi human being directed towards dialogue, exchange and profound change opened to inter-faith dialogue. The same happened in Ur of the Chaldeans, where various religious sects witnessed the possibility of the success of religious dialogue and brotherhood declared by His Holiness Pope Francis during his visit to Mesopotamia in March 2021.

Sectarianism in the political sphere influences governmental choices and the distribution of institutional positions that result in vote rigging during elections and growing levels of internal corruption. This deprives citizens of their ability to be actively engaged in politics. Even though Iraq has sufficient economic resources to meet the needs of its people, 40% of the population lives below the

poverty line. Internal tensions arise as a result of political parties' constant competitiveness, and Iraqi citizens are losing trust in their representatives after years of restoration that, from an economic and political perspective, never occurred. The main political decisions are in the hands of the most influential political parties that subjugate state decisions to their interest using sectarianism. For example, Hon. Warda was renamed member of the Prime Minister's Office Committee on National Reconciliation, having experiences throughout her career, but she was immediately replaced by a man just because he was a member of the previous political movement, despite having no expertise in the sector. The purpose was to protect the influential party while also prohibiting any form of competition.

Respecting human rights is essential in promoting religious freedom. Islamic law has an impact on legislation that is subject to Sharia's pillars, as well as the preservation of democratic norms. In Iraq, there is freedom of worship, which is different from religious freedom, because Article 26 of the Constitution requires minors from non-Muslim minorities to convert to Islam if one of their parents is Islamized, restricting their capacity to make religious decisions. Furthermore the right to convert is only granted to non-Muslims who wish to convert to Islam; anything else is deemed a crime punished by up to apostasy. As a consequence of the lack of legal protection for religion, most Christian Iraqis are persecuted and forced to live in diaspora, with violence and genocidal events diminishing their presence in the country. Children are taught the Islamic faith from an early age to a degree in which they end up insulting and condemning their classmates as "infidels" if they are Christians.

According to the minister, this requires educational action in order to influence

social views toward diversity and respect for religions other than Islam. In this way society evolves, and citizens feel responsible for asserting their rights and duties as members of a community, gaining a status that entails responsibilities as well as sharing their position with other individuals. Every person raises their sense of duty for the nation to the extent that they feel secure in the protection of any type of freedom, from religion to views and speech, and so on. According to H.E. Warda, investing in human capabilities is necessary in order to promote and develop awareness of young men and women who will one day become future leaders. Through her organisation, they are promoting many initiatives, including new infrastructure, in order to offer possibilities for a decent lifestyle.

Thanks to the international coalition forces sent to combat ISIS, several entities such as Christian Solidarity, United Nations and others were able to provide their support and humanitarian aid in the region. For example, her organisation provides support alongside other NGOs by distributing drinking water filters, restoring buildings such as homes and schools destroyed by ISIS, and facilitating humanitarian corridors.

In conclusion, the Iraqi government is actively promoting a series of initiatives aimed at protecting human rights. In fact, in order to promote these objectives, the government founded a new committee called the "National Reconciliation Committee" which was in charge of these efforts. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of the military in the region as the main promoters of security and peaceful coexistence among civilians. She concluded her speech with some recommendations, including: improving relations with Iraq in order to support and train security forces in the service of citizens; providing financial and moral support to civil organisations; and increasing the civilian education

and sensibility towards the value of peace and security.

3. SFA IMPERATIVES

Much was accomplished by this exchange of knowledge, most notably,

aims at the integration of civilian and military activities with the final objective of achieving common goals, coordination, and deconfliction.

In the case of Interreligious dialogue, a CA that was proposed by the professors during the first panel is the integra-

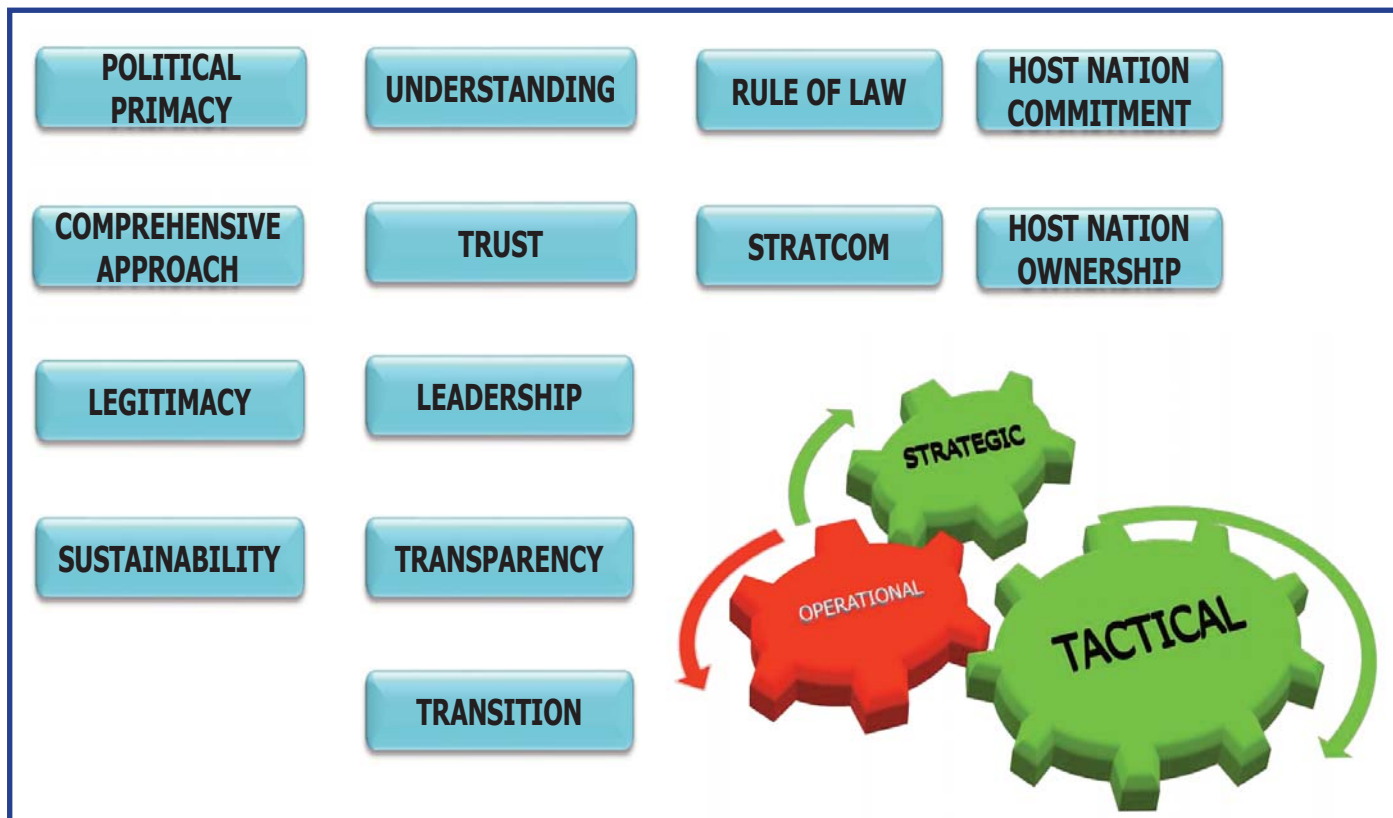


Image 9. NATO SFA Principles.

new ways of producing peace through the use of religion and dialogue. In fact, we were able to establish a link between the use of this type of dialogue and the SFA imperatives detailed in the AJP 3.16, as explained in the following paragraphs, “Allied Joint doctrine for Security Force Assistance SFA” that outlined direction and guidance on how NATO provides SFA operators and activities. The list includes 13 imperatives and we focused on the analysis of those that held the most amount of relevance in the context of the study seminar.

3.1 COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

A comprehensive approach (CA) is an imperative of any SFA operation that

tion of talks between religious leaders as well as military ones with the objective of establishing a plan of action and following the said plan. Cooperation in the CA must be achieved in order to fully integrate these dialogues and promote peace-building in the region.

3.2 TRUST

Trust between parties, namely SFA and all other parties involved, is an essential imperative for the success of the operation. Therefore, the development and maintenance of these relations should be the main priority based on credibility, reliability, and legitimacy. Indeed, trust is an essential factor if one wants

to achieve a peaceful dialogue between religious actors, as previously explained by Dr Al Hindy and Dr Majeda Omar. It is only through the achievement of trust that Interreligious dialogue can be conducted and its legitimacy recognised. In fact, to quote a previous section of the paper: “simply recognising other theological beliefs is not enough to achieve acceptance, but one must recognise the legitimacy of another’s truth.”

As indicated by the third panel, “trust” is crucial to restoring peace and security among the MENA countries at the political level. Dr Elie Abouaoun highlighted its importance, stressing that civil society has lost faith in its government representatives as a result of rising corruption and individualism.

In addition, Iraqi citizens are not actively engaged in the political sphere. In fact, Hon. Pascale Icho Warda pointed out that one of the main reasons for distrust is the supremacy of influential political parties that get involved in corruption resulting in the alienation of the Iraqi population.

3.3 RULE OF LAW

The seventh imperative of the AJP-3.16 regards “all SFA activities that should promote the rule of law, including applicable human rights and gender perspectives [...] to ensure that local forces operate according to the law”.

Among the main recommendations during the third panel, Dr Elie Abouaoun and H.E. Hon. Pascale Icho Warda stressed the importance of recognizing the difference between local and national political roles, as well as promoting an inclusive citizenship recognizing the diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, and politics. SFA Operators should be involved in the organisation of social activities where the civil society is in-

involved in order to minimise any form of violence or abuse and encourage social participation and legal compliance in order to foster reconciliation.

3.4 HOST NATION COMMITMENT AND OWNERSHIP

The tenth imperative of the AJP-3.16 states “planning for and successfully providing SFA requires the long-term commitment of the Host Nation (HN) and all actors involved. Commitment is built upon personal and mutual trust, underpinned by strong leadership” and “to achieve common goals that benefit all, relationships should be built upon cooperation” (citation).

In her intervention, Prof. Aicha Haddou clearly highlighted the importance of Morocco’s will to develop and carry out a new strategy to counter violent extremism. She also stressed the significant role Moroccan institutions and research centres have played in the fight against radical phenomena and the numerous efforts carried out to train imams and preachers.

Hence, in order to have a fair chance at countering these types of phenomena, it is extremely important that the HN is fully committed to the battle at hand. Furthermore, there is a dire need for education, especially with regards to religious leaders. These recommendations closely relate to SFA’s tenth imperative regarding HN commitment and ownership, as well as strong leadership. The concept of cooperation was significantly stressed by both speakers in the second session.

Indeed, they highlighted numerous forms of cooperation, as for instance between international, regional and local actors, as well as between secular and religious ones. SFA operators have the potential to foster this cooperation by bringing the various actors to the ne-

gotiating table, that must be a place of trust and safe dialogue.

4. CONCLUSION

Over the first week of May, a study seminar was held discussing religion and its role in peace building and security in the MENA region hosted by the NATO

This report does not only express what was said during the seminar, but also tries to emphasise the importance of maintaining and strengthening relations between military forces and civil societies.

As previously explained, it is important to foster peace and reconciliation among countries which suffer from crimes,

DR. ELIE AL HINDY
"In order to support the efforts of peacemaking, an international security strategy must promote interfaith initiatives for peace and reconciliation"

DR. MAJEDA OMAR
"Dialogue contributes to enhancing peace and stability by building onto awareness and acceptance in the differences within societies"

IMAM YAHYA PALLAVICINI
"Islam has been abused by radical movements to impose a puritan interpretation on Muslim behavior which in turn legitimizes violence and hatred".

DR. AÏCHA HADDOU
"We need to prevent conflicts, engage in religious diplomacy as a strong weapon to spread peaceful coexistence between various religious sects".

DR. ELIE ABOUAOUN
"We need to create a sustainable and respectful environment for peaceful coexistence to be achieved through diplomacy and culture comprehension".

H.E. PASCALE ISHO WARD
"With the concern of the peaceful horizons of partnership, it is possible to have sustainable peaceful coexistence and security".

SFA COE in collaboration with the Religion & Security Council.

In this study seminar, various intellectuals of the field, as well as high-ranking military officers, were present and contributed to lectures and debated issues surrounding the topic.

persecutions, and perpetual conflicts.

The importance of military aid should be evaluated, not only by the implementation of security forces, but also by their ability to dialogue with the local population while adhering to SFA principles and imperatives.

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STUDY SEMINAR – “Religion, Peace, and Security: Challenges and Prospects in the MENA Region”

Rome, Air Force's Officers Club “Casa dell' Aviatore”

5-6 MAY 2022

Organized by

Religion & Security Council (RSC)

with the support of

NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE)

AIM

To examine the positive and constructive role that the "religious factor" can play in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a driver of peace and security, rather than of conflict and instability. The findings and conclusions of the Study Seminar will support NATO SFA COE's research activities aimed at developing strategic concepts and doctrines for the planning and conduct of stabilization and reconstruction efforts in crisis scenarios.

EXPERTISE

The Study Seminar will bring together an international group of scholars, experts, and practitioners, who will share their insights and recommendations on how religion can help prevent and defuse confrontational situations, counter the radical discourse and narratives, overcome sectarian discrimination and protect human rights, enable cooperation and partnership relations between different religious denominations and actors.

PROCEEDINGS

These defining issues for the future of peace and security in the MENA region will be addressed during three thematic sessions: 1) *Interreligious Dialogue in Conflicts Resolution and Peace-Building*; 2) *Addressing Radical Thinking and Violent Extremism*; 3) *How to Foster Reconciliation and Peaceful Coexistence: Best Policies and Practices*. Each session will feature the presentations of 2 keynote speakers, followed by a round-table discussion.

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