



The Fez Process and the Fez Plan of Action on the role of religious leaders in preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes

In March 2015, the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (the “Office”) launched an initiative to engage with religious leaders from around the world on their role in preventing incitement to violence that could lead, in the worst cases, to atrocity crimes. The outcome of this initiative, known as the “Fez Plan of Action” will be launched in New York in July 2017. The participation of the Secretary-General in the launch event will serve to underscore the important role that these influential actors can play in preventing conflict and violence and will serve as a call to action.

The mandate for the Office’s work on the prevention of incitement comes from two sources; (i) the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which lists “direct and public incitement to commit genocide” as a “punishable act”. Incitement to violence against one of the groups protected under the Convention is an indicator of the risk of genocide; and (ii) Paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome document, adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 60/1, in which Member States commit to “protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity”. Heads of State and Government agreed that this responsibility “entails the prevention of such crimes, including their incitement.”

In societies that are under stress as a result of political, security or other forms of instability, one of the warning signs and powerful triggers of violence that can lead to genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity (“atrocity crimes”) is the kind of messages in public discourse and the media that spread hostility and hatred and encourage or incite populations to commit violence against specific communities, often on the basis of their religious or ethnic identity. The Office has noted an alarming spike in online and offline hate speech and incitement in recent years, both in conflict and peaceful situations.

Hate speech and incitement to violence is most effective when the source is a person of influence and the audience is receptive, as in the case of religious leaders. Religious actors are often responsible for hate speech and incitement - but are also often responsible for preventing and countering incitement by spreading messages of peace and tolerance. Given the particular influence of religious leaders, the Office has sought to engage with them on the development and implementation of strategies for preventing incitement to violence around the world.

This work is anchored in both research and in practice. In particular the Office’s engagement is linked to the Rabat Plan of Action¹ on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence – a tool developed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that includes mostly legal recommendations to Member States to combat incitement. Linked to the Rabat Plan of Action and in cooperation with OHCHR, the Office developed a set of Policy Options, non-legal recommendations for different stakeholders aimed at preventing incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes. Both documents recognize the influential role played by the media and religious leaders in preventing and combatting incitement to violence.

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/TheRabatPlanofAction.aspx>

After broad consultations, the Office organized a series of meetings with religious leaders to discuss their role in preventing incitement to violence and develop appropriate strategies. In April 2015, the first meeting took place in Fez, Morocco, with the support of the KAICIID Dialogue Centre and the Government of Morocco. The meeting brought together representatives of different religions and beliefs and faith based organisations, as well as religious scholars and experts, both women and men, from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

The constructive discussions that took place led to the development of a draft declaration of principles (the “Fez Declaration”) and a Plan of Action for religious leaders to prevent incitement which could lead to atrocity crimes, particularly when violence is imminent. The Plan of Action consists of a series of actions that religious leaders can take to prevent and counter incitement to violence, especially in situations where there is a risk of atrocity crimes. These options include engaging in dialogue with those who express radical views; countering incitement both online and offline; as well as supporting interfaith dialogue, education and activities that promote respect for freedom of religion and belief, religious and cultural diversity. Both Plan of Action and Declaration have been reviewed at regional meetings with religious leaders from Africa, the Americas, the Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East, with the support of United Nations partners, Member States, inter-governmental and civil society partners. Each meeting has served to develop a regional strategy for implementation of the Fez Plan of Action.

The contributions from all regional meetings will be used to finalise the Fez Plan of Action, which will be launched at an event in New York in July 2017. After the Plan of Action has been launched, an event focused on its implementation will follow. This event will bring together Member States and other partners who are ready to support initiatives in different regions that will contribute to this endeavor.

The Fez Plan of Action and related regional action plans are pioneering documents as they are the first to engage with religious actors and religious leaders to develop context specific strategies to prevent incitement that could lead to atrocity crimes. Implementation of the Fez Plan of Action and regional strategies could contribute to the prevention of atrocity crimes, especially in areas affected by religious and sectarian tensions and violence.

The Office has established an inter-agency working group to examine complementarity between the Fez Plan of Action and other programmes of the United Nations, including those relating to conflict prevention, counter-terrorism, human rights protection, peace building and sustainable development and to engage support for implementation of elements of the Fez Plan of Action and regional strategies.

As the next step in the Fez Process, the Office is supporting the organization of workshops with religious leaders in countries that have experienced or are currently experiencing hate speech, hostility or incitement to violence that targets communities based on their religious identity, to develop national strategies that religious leaders can implement, working in cooperation with each other across religions, and in cooperation with the United Nations and national authorities. The first meeting of this kind took place in Luton, United Kingdom, on 29 November 2016, and focused on the role of religious leaders and actors in addressing the rise of hate speech and hate crimes after the Brexit referendum. Another meeting with religious leaders from the Great Lake region took place in Addis Ababa in February 2017. The outcome of the meeting was a strategy for Christian Churches to sustain peace in Burundi.

The meeting to launch the Fez Plan of Action will be chaired by the United Secretary-General.