

Concept Note on a Proposed World Conference on “Religions, Creeds and/or Other Value Systems: Joining Forces to Enhance Equal Citizenship Rights”

Date: 25 June 2018

Room: XVI

Location:

Geneva, Switzerland

United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG)

Goal:

Foster greater mutual understanding and tolerance as well as initiate a structured dialogue whose goal would be to lead to the reduction of the plight and concerns of minorities¹ and people on the move worldwide through the enhancement of a model of inclusive and equal citizenship rights.

¹ It is explained later in this concept note that the term “minorities” is ambiguous either because it could be unnecessarily divisive or because of its “marginalising” connotation. It is used in the present context for the sake of convenience in view of the number of international human rights instruments referring to “minorities.”

Purpose:

The World Conference will build on, and globalize, the discussions initiated in the side-event: *“Islam and Christianity: The Great Convergence - Working jointly towards equal citizenship rights”* held on 15 March 2017 at the United Nations Office in Geneva. The March 2017 event focused on the potential resulting from a great convergence between Islam and Christianity to promote equal citizenship rights. Relying on the Christian-Muslim convergence as a core moving force, the scope of the World Conference will encompass different affiliations from within these religions and with other religions and beliefs, with a view to harnessing their collective energy in the pursuit of equal citizenship rights.

The purpose of this concept note is to chart a more inclusive understanding and forward-looking discussion of equal citizenship rights informed by religious pluralism. Citizenship is a historically contested and continually evolving concept. It refers to entitlements of all individuals to nationally and/or internationally recognized rights as well as the acceptance of duties and obligations in relation to the State. Different models of citizenship identify various conceptual relationships between individuals and societies. This can take shape through the processes of social consensus, integration and/or community-building, to name but a few, that require further discussion to identify a national model of citizenship that is compatible with diversity and respect of human rights of people irrespective of ethnic, religious, geographical and cultural origins. Issues related to the promotion of equal and inclusive citizenship rights have been addressed at various world conferences involving religious leaders such as; i) the **2001 Global Agenda on the Dialogue among Civilisations** adopted by the United Nations General Assembly; ii) the **2008 Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue**; iii) the **2008 Baku Declaration for the Promotion of Intercultural Dialogue**; iv) the **First Christian – Muslim Summit** organized in Washington D. C. from 1-3 May 2010; v) the **Second Christian – Muslim Summit** held in Beirut (Lebanon) from 18-20 June 2012; vi) the **Third Session of the Christian - Muslim Summit** convened in The Vatican from 2-4 December 2014²; vii) the **Sixth Meeting of the Istanbul Process** entitled *“A Cross-Regional Perspective on Best Practices and Policies for Promoting Religious Tolerance and*

² This Summit was attended by the Geneva Centre’s Executive Director Ambassador Idriss Jazairy

Strengthening Resilience” held on 20-21 July 2016 in Singapore; viii) the **Fifth Baku International Humanitarian Forum** from 29 to 30 September 2016; ix) the **Fourth Session of the Christian - Muslim Summit held in Tehran** (Iran) from 6-9 November 2016; x) the **Summit of Religious Leaders for Peace in the Middle East** organized by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) in Alicante, Spain, from 14-16 November 2016; xi) the **2017 “Freedom and Citizenship: Diversity and Integration” conference**, co-hosted by the al-Azhar University and the Holy See in Cairo (Egypt) from 28 February to 1 March 2017; xii) the **2017 Beirut Declaration** and its 18 commitments on “*Faith for Rights*”; xiii) the **Rabat+5 Symposium** held in Morocco from 6 to 7 December 2017; xiv) the **panel discussion entitled “Role of Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding in the Middle East”** that took place on 18 July 2017 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York as a follow-up to the 2016 Summit of Religious Leaders for Peace in the Middle East and; xv) the **2018 “Religion and Rights: Strengthening Common Ground”** conference that was held on 16 February 2018 at the United Nations Office at Geneva. In December 2016, the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted the “*Charter on Citizens’ Rights*” in which refers to *inter alia* the need to provide citizens with equal and non-discriminatory access to “*rights of humankind*”³. This World Conference will therefore build on the observations made by distinguished international leaders and religious figures during these conferences to move forward the agenda of realizing and of promoting equal and inclusive citizenship rights to encompass all world citizens irrespective of religious beliefs, denominations and/or value systems.

Citizenship is a dynamic concept which evolves with the times. Citizens are people that are recognised by custom or law to be members of a community. The citizen belonged to a city or city-state in Ancient Greece, (hence *citi zen*). It was thereafter broadened to encompass all “*free residents*” in the empire in Roman times. Monarchic subjects, a passive concept, were replaced by citizens, a participatory concept, after the French Revolution and “*free white persons*” having lived for 2 years in the US gained its citizenship by virtue of the US Naturalisation Act of 1790. The 14th Amendment to the US Constitution of 1868 states that “*All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the*

³ Islamic Republic of Iran 2016. “*Charter on Citizens’ Rights*.” December 2016. Online. URL: <http://epub.citizensrights.ir/CitizensRightsEN.pdf> (Available on 08.01.2017)

United States and of the State wherein they reside.” Citizenship is also increasingly conveyed by either parent, ending the patrilineal transmission of the recent past.

Current practices related to citizenship are becoming more inclusive with the Civil Rights movement in the US, and elsewhere as the *jus soli* also tends to prevail.

Freedom has progressed with decolonization and the increased spread of liberalism, but not equality. Equality continues to be denied *de facto* to the poor, to women and children, to the disabled and to other vulnerable groups, to people that are seen as different because of their origin or their religion or creed. This is translated in rising inequality of income worldwide.

In this regard, social components of communities have at times been referred to as minorities based on the provisions set forth in numerous international instruments such as in *inter alia* the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. These instruments stipulate a range of protective measures guaranteeing minorities – or merely social components of society - the right to enjoy and exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The concept of minority itself derives from the definition that a part of the population is distinct from the rest owing to objective factors having to do with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identities. This concept also entails a subjective element in which minorities recognize and accept themselves that they constitute a separate entity, and probably a vulnerable one, within a society⁴. In light of these observations, minorities become reduced to a sub-group and a natural target of discrimination and of marginalization by the majority⁵. Some members of such sub-groups are particularly vulnerable which is the case for women and girls, especially from indigenous backgrounds, as well as youth. This in turn is an obstacle to social harmony hindering the prospects of diversity and in contradiction with the spirit of international law upholding the principles of equality and of non-discrimination. In the al-Azhar declaration calling for a “*renewed alliance*” between Islam, Christianity and other religions that was adopted following the end of the conference “*Freedom, Citizenship, Diversity*

⁴ OHCHR 2010. “*Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation.*” See page 2. Online. URL: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/MinorityRights_en.pdf (Available on 04.03.2017)

⁵ According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in July 2017, 48% of Muslims in the US said they had experienced discrimination in the past year <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40726759> (Available on 03.08.2017)

and Integration,” it was emphasized that the concept of minority “*veils a sense of discrimination and separation*” creating “*differences between Muslims and Christians, but also between Muslims themselves, considering that it leads to dispersion of allegiance and favours foreign interests*⁶.” To overcome this situation, the declaration highlighted the need to “*develop our life in common,*” and to reinforce “*citizenship in theory and in practice*⁷.” Therefore, in law, all citizens having the same rights, the notion of “*equal citizenship rights*” would be tautological. In practice, however, as the saying goes, “*some citizens are more equal than others*”.

For the purpose of the present concept note on the world conference, the term “*minority*” will be used only when indispensable for pragmatic purposes to highlight the international commitments to the protection of vulnerable segments of society, which is referred to, somewhat inadequately in international parlance, as minorities.

To foster and strengthen equal citizenship rights, religious minorities or individuals affiliated of a particular religion need to be empowered so as to enable them to participate in the social development of their nations. The underlying premise of such societies is respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including cultural and religious diversity, human dignity, social justice, gender equality and equal educational and employment opportunities. The different social components of any community, whether related to religious affiliation, or to other features of diversity, must be empowered to enable individuals and/or communities to participate in the society on the basis of equality, and not just equity. In turn, this would unleash the full potential of diversity.

Some of the current cases of exacerbation of the plight of minority groups are related to the proliferation of terrorist groups in areas where social vacuums have spread as a result of conflict. International and local conflicts, whether or not to cope with civil strife or governance failings in human rights policies, have created fertile ground for the privatization of violence and the dismemberment of nations and therefore of their citizenry. The ending of conflict will

⁶ OASIS 2017. “*There Are No Minorities, only Citizens.*” 13.04.2017. Online URL: <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/religions-and-the-public-sphere/2017/04/13/there-are-no-minorities-only-citizens> (Available on 17.07.2017)

⁷ Ibid

leave the social fabric in tatters and its repair will involve going back to square one by starting at the school level, that will require the need to promote inclusive and equal citizenship rights at school level.

Furthermore, flowing from the historical fact that Christianity and Islam share a common Abrahamic heritage, and constitute over half of humanity, the proposed conference would seek to capitalize on the convergence between these two religions in particular and also to extend its reach beyond them, so as to mitigate marginalization of all minorities world-wide, particularly faith-based discrimination, xenophobia and consequent violence, with the aim of building a culture of peace, tolerance and inter-cultural dialogue. The reasons for focusing on religious minorities arise from the fact that there is a broad-based extremist attempt across the world to distort religion to conjure up “divine” reasons for conflicts and irreconcilable opposition between the main civilizations despite the fact that the latter have contributed, since time immemorial, to welfare, progress and prosperity of the world. From time immemorial the fig-leaf for the pursuit of unavowed self-seeking interests has been the invocation of such religions, creeds and value systems. This is particularly true within and between the three Abrahamic religions that preach converging messages of peace and tolerance but that have been the target of manipulation to justify their very opposites. Even Buddhism, admired world-wide for its peaceful message as epitomized by Mahatma Gandhi, during last century is now being manipulated to justify the ethnic cleansing of a minority Muslim community.

Here is currently an identity crisis which assails people across the world. Ideologies have collapsed, traditional political parties are not seen as representative. Government élites have become too remote from the people who complain of a democratic void. The substitutes found to fill this void may undermine national cohesion or stimulate communitarianism. People are angry by what they perceive to be their disempowerment. They realize that their village or town is too small to empower them to participate directly in more than a small part of the decisions that affect their daily lives, that national governments based on indirect representation are too remote from their concerns and that critical issues such as the environment, climate change pandemics or global economic crises which affect them increasingly, call for action by global citizenship, a concept for which they are ill-prepared. In this crisis, religions themselves are being challenged by the effects of their malevolent manipulation to justify violence and hatred

of the Other. Globalisation transforms any of the resulting social breakdown into a world pandemic.

There is an urgent need to correct this ominous trend leading ordinary people to assuage their identity crisis by locking themselves in a false sense of certainty provided by radicalism or populism. Action is urgent lest this trend heralds the introduction of an era of intolerance and generalised conflict. Therefore, it is high time that religious leaders, intellectuals, politicians, public figures and community leaders join hand in hand to initiate a global effort, first, to make sure that our equally shared humanity is reflected in equal citizenship rights not only in theory, but in practice.

Second, since religious leaders, politicians and community leaders interact regularly with their societies and therefore are more capable of making behavioural change in their societies, a greater responsibility lies at their shoulder to find appropriate ways to eliminate any forms of practices that hinder equal citizenship rights in their societies. This conference is an outcry for followers of these faiths or upholders of these value-systems, whether lay or religious leaders, to rise and to reject jointly the instrumentalization of faiths and value systems for illicit motives and to restore the reality of the convergence of their aspirations for a world living in peace and harmony.

Lastly, the world conference will provide an opportunity for participants to share information, experiences, expertise, best practices and a practical list of concrete steps at different levels and follow-up mechanisms on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies through equal citizenship and fostering respect for religious freedom.

Target Groups:

The conference aims to target relevant stakeholders addressing religious intolerance and advocating for peaceful and inclusive societies. These would principally be:

- Governments;

- Diplomats;
- Religious leaders;
- UN agencies & other IGOs;
- NGOs in human rights and development fields, youth, women and indigenous peoples;
- Think tanks;
- Academia.

Objectives:

1. To challenge, based on human rights principles, prevailing misunderstandings and misconceptions between Muslims and Christians, and between either of these religions and other religions and beliefs;
2. To analyse current mechanisms related to the promotion, protection and implementation of minority rights, and identify areas of improvement;
3. To analyse current mechanisms related to the promotion, protection and implementation of the rights of people on the move, and identify areas of improvement;
4. To question why, despite international instruments and mechanisms on minority rights the realization of equality in citizenship rights is not progressing sufficiently, and to outline factors responsible for the marginalization of religious minorities;
5. To identify principles shared by Islam, Christianity and other religions and beliefs and enshrined in human rights;
6. To identify potential for common action to advance equal citizenship rights through the upgrade of identified bedrock principles between Muslims, Christians and other religions and beliefs;
7. To highlight best practice and proposals for achieving pragmatic solutions for promoting equal citizenship rights with regard to faith-based minorities, and sub-groups such as women and girls, especially from indigenous backgrounds, as well as youth in all regions of the world;
8. To outline recommendations, including identification of collective responsibilities, accountability and follow-up actions and mechanisms.

Outcomes:

The World Conference aims to provide the following outcomes:

1. To analyse the current framework of rights of social components/minorities and of people on the move and to identify measures to influence policy-change in favour of promoting and strengthening minority rights;
2. To identify models of equal citizenship rights focused on fostering social cohesion and the securing of equal civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights;
3. To provide a written report that reflects the discussions, conclusions and recommendations for follow-up;
4. To adopt a Geneva declaration on equal citizenship rights.