

International scientific and practical conference “Islam – the Religion of Peace and Goodness”
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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many thanks for the kind invitation to this international scientific and practical conference in Uzbekistan. While unfortunately I cannot be with you in person, I am pleased to deliver opening remarks remotely from the Regional Office for Central Asia of UN Human Rights.

Last year, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres **stated** that Islam’s message of peace, compassion and grace has inspired people across the globe for well over a millennium. He noted that the very word Islam derives from the same root word *salam*/peace. He also underscored the universal values that animate the United Nations Charter and lie at the core of our quest for justice, human rights and peace.

Human rights indeed constitute a common heritage of all nations, cultures and religions. High Commissioner Volker Türk **compared** the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to a river that has been nourished by many streams. Among them, he paid tribute to Islam’s emphasis on human dignity and the principle of *zakat*, compassionate sharing.

The previous High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet also **commended** the vision of a “Compassionate Islam” intersecting with the Sustainable Development Goals and reinforcing their strength. The imperative of “leaving no one behind” also means ensuring that the right to freedom of religion or belief is fully respected, including for those belonging to minority religions.

Yet, individuals and communities around the world continue to be targeted by intolerance, discrimination and violence based on religion or belief. High Commissioner Volker Türk **flagged** that Islamophobia has dehumanized entire communities, including through hate speech that is magnified by social media. Many have been subjected to surveillance and religious profiling. Mosques have been attacked, and sometimes destroyed. Counter-extremism laws, policies and practices have been misused, leading to illegal arrests, arbitrary detention and violence. Muslim women and girls often bear the brunt of verbal abuse, physical intimidation, death threats and actual violence.

At the same time, women and girls may also face exclusion from the public sphere and their institutionalised, systematic oppression in the name of religion. For example, the High Commissioner two months ago **called** on the de facto authorities in Afghanistan to immediately repeal the egregious law on “Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice”, which effectively attempts to render women into faceless, voiceless shadows. Other restrictions in the newly adopted law, which are vaguely defined, affect for example the right to freely practice one’s religion.

States must urgently step up their efforts to combat intolerance against people based on religion or belief, within the parameters of international human rights law. They should use the many tools and soft law standards that already exist. [Human Rights Council resolution 16/18](#) has set out an action plan for countries to address religious intolerance, and the Istanbul Process is a dedicated intergovernmental mechanism to implement it. The [Rabat Plan of Action](#) and the Beirut Declaration on “[Faith for Rights](#)” can further guide efforts by countries and non-State actors.

Working with religious leaders, faith-based actors and UN independent experts, the Office of the High Commissioner has sought to open a space for cross-disciplinary reflection and action on the links between religions and human rights. This led to the adoption in 2017 of the Beirut Declaration and its corresponding 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights”. This framework lays out the human rights responsibilities of faith-based actors. For example, religious leaders can have very positive impact if they speak out firmly and promptly against hate speech. It also includes the commitment to revisit the religious understandings and interpretations that appear to perpetuate gender inequality and harmful stereotypes, or condone gender-based violence.

Key to positive change on the ground is the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the [#Faith4Rights toolkit](#). Last November, we co-organized a workshop in Morocco with religious actors, women’s rights experts, academics and parliamentarians from the Middle East and North Africa region, following up on the use of the “Faith for Rights” framework by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. This pilot project focused on ensuring that culture, tradition and certain religious interpretations are not used to violate women’s rights. The participants reflected on involving male and female parliamentarians with a view to strengthening women’s rights in national legislation and lifting reservations to the CEDAW Convention.

The former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Abdelfattah Amor, [noted](#) that “religious texts are not closed texts and that cultural practices, even at the State level, can be reshaped according to the requirements of modern life”. In his seminal study published already in 2002, he also argued that “it cannot be denied that, in most religions, misinterpretations detrimental to women are due to men. It seems highly likely that, if women had participated with men in such interpretive work, discrimination would without doubt be less prejudicial to their rights”.

Human rights and faith are not opposing forces – [indeed](#), it is *human* interpretation that creates tensions. Therefore, governments, religious authorities and a wide range of civil society actors should work jointly to uphold human dignity and equality for all, using the constructive approach laid out by the faith-based framework of the Beirut Declaration on “Faith for Rights”.

Inclusive faith literacy and human rights literacy is needed to foster peaceful, diverse and cohesive societies. The “Faith for Rights” framework has been facilitating peer-exchanges about concrete efforts on the ground. For example, several religious leaders who are part of the Faith for Rights “commUNity of practices” have advocated for people of all faiths to have unimpeded access to their places of worship, and they have also condemned incitement to violence, discrimination or hostility in the name of religion. Peer-to-peer learning and awareness-raising may promote respect and understanding between individuals and communities across religions and beliefs.

Let me conclude with a quote from a recent report by the Secretary-General, [stressing](#) that States should redouble their efforts, with the support of the United Nations, to ensure the equal protection of everyone by adopting [comprehensive anti-discrimination laws](#) in conformity with international human rights standards.

Thank you and best wishes for your discussions.