QUNO
Quaker United Nations Office

Peacebuilding perspectives on Religion, Violence and Extremism.

QUNO remarks at the Second Annual Symposium on The Role of Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in International Affairs, UN Headquarters, Monday, 1 February 2016.

Introduction

I am here today representing the Quaker office at the United Nations, which has been in New York accompanying delegates and officials since the founding of the UN. In New York, QUNO focuses on Peacebuilding and the Prevention of Violent Conflict, and it is from a peacebuilding perspective on religion, violence and extremism that I would like to speak with you this morning.

QUNO works at a policy level, but our work is rooted in the lived experience of those impacted by violence and fragility around the world, particularly through the peacebuilding work of our sister organization, the American Friends Service Committee, in communities in 15 countries around the world– including the United States.

In our work, we convene peacebuilding organizations, we uphold local voices and perspectives, and we bring the latest experience of peacebuilding practitioners and academics to inform UN policy making.

In the last year we have had a particular focus on the reviews of the Peacebuilding Architecture and Peace Operations, on the peaceful, just and inclusive societies bedrock of the 2030 Agenda, and we have been exploring greater engagement with the increased focus on prevention at the UN.

My intention in my remarks today is to complement Professor Esposito's insights with some additional comments on what this topic looks like through a peacebuilding lens, and how this fits in to the current discussions at the UN on the Prevention of Violent Conflict and more broadly. Like many other religious groups, Quakers have been involved in international affairs and humanitarian, peace and justice work for many years, so my comments will also come from a peace perspective, one deeply grounded in religious tradition.

Summary

I will be making three main points:

I. We are at a time of choice for the international community: we can choose to act out of fear and national interest, or choose a path of hope based on a shared, cooperative vision of the future. We need to move away from a mindset framed in terms of security as a zero sum game, of us versus them, towards one where security is about mutual interdependence at all levels

II. Preventing violent extremism is not about ideologies, it's not about military strategy: rather, it is about finding ways to accompany communities in becoming more resilient, in fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies, as the 2030 Agenda has it

III. Faith based approaches have an important role to play, not just as an offset to the way that religion is being misused and exploited to foster violence and suffering, but because of the insights and experience that religious actors can bring in addressing the root causes of violence, in their historic witness to peace, reconciliation, inclusion and social and economic justice

Peacebuilding perspectives on religion, violence and extremism.

Here are some examples of the contributions that peacebuilding organizations are bringing to this discussion, both from a research perspective and from lessons learned from working with local communities.

At the research level, peacebuilding organizations have been helping to inform the overall framing of the issues, and in particular to start to provide an evidence base for both the proximate and deeper root causes of violent extremism.

- Mercy Corps have produced a number of relevant reports, including at the end of last year, "From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups", based on interviews with jihadists and their families in Jordan. The report noted that the motivations of these jihadists were not particularly about religion, or even about economics: "The decision to fight appears to be less about a particular interpretation of one's religious obligations, and more an emotional response to injustices perpetrated by an outside group". Indeed, this is a

theme that is arising from a number of similar community level studies, that the motivations involved are much more to do with experiences of political and social exclusion, of injustice and of violence. This is an approach that is picked up in the Secretary General's plan of Action, issued last month, which for example contains an interesting paragraph on the impact of harsh prison treatment on fostering radicalization

- Saferworld has this week launched a series of case studies entitled "A new war on terror or a new search for peace? Learning the lessons of Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen" which provides a really detailed and interesting look at the lessons learned from a number of contexts where the international community has tried to respond to violent conflict and extremism. For example, here's a quote from one interviewee "Over 15 years, the West has believed that trading justice for security, and human rights for counter-terrorism was possible – but every time human rights have been ignored, this has created more terrorists". Saferworld's recommendation is that we need an approach that is less reliant on military strategies, tougher on abuse, corruption and bad governance, more discerning about partners and more focused on working with societies to achieve just and lasting peace

At the level of work on the ground, peacebuilding organizations have also been detailing lessons learned from working with local communities. For example:

- Interpeace is coming to the end of a substantial three-year research project, designed to flesh out a framework for assessing resilience, rooted in fieldwork in Timor Leste, Guatemala, Liberia. This has involved extensive work with communities and civil society actors to try to identify what constitutes resilience, and is coming out with some really important findings, that processes of change can only be sustainable and truly peaceful when they emerge from inclusive dialogues engaging people from all sectors of society, that peacebuilding that is orientated towards resilience emphasizes the strengths, assets and capacities that exist in society, and that when humanitarian interventions are sensitive to conflict dynamics and build on, rather than erode, existing resilience capacities, they will have a greater chance of succeeding.

- The American Friends Service Committee is working on articulating the concept of Shared Security – based on the idea that violence can never achieve peace, and that all of us are more secure when everyone's basic needs are met. As part of this, they are putting together a series of case studies from around the world. In Indonesia, for example, the study describes

work that supports young local peacemakers to organize bridge-building activities in their communities, such as the Peace Torch project that started locally as a way to bring together different religious communities in West Timor, and now has grown to a national level. This work is also experimenting with ways to go beyond celebrating pluralism and diversity to engaging and equipping youth to resist radicalization and act as positive agents for peace

These are just a few examples of the work that is being done in this area. The point here is that this talk of building more resilient, just and peaceful communities isn't just theoretical. There are local and international organizations all over the world who are working on these issues, right now - the examples I've quoted were all published over the last 6 months. We actually know a lot about what needs to be done, but we need resources and focus to do it on the scale that is required

A new prevention agenda at the UN

So how does this discussion fit in with current developments at the UN, and with the changing currents of issues and concerns within the international community?

From a big picture perspective, the UN – indeed the international community as a whole – is in a curious place right now. On peace & security issues we seem to have reached a new low, characterized by a lack of cooperation between not only the major powers but the middle powers too – that has contributed to an unprecedented humanitarian disaster unfolding across Western Asia and Europe.

But at the same time, we have had some extraordinary achievements in multilateralism in the agreements on the 2030 Agenda and on climate change, where countries have decided to move on from holding entrenched positions of global North versus global South, to a new paradigm based on cooperative approaches to common problems, where everyone has needs and everyone has something to contribute.

As we move into 2016, there are signs of an emerging new consensus around the importance of the prevention of violent conflict and the necessity of addressing root causes. The pace of this has been quite bewildering – so in the last 6 months or so:

- In the 2030 Agenda, one of 5 'Ps', the core issues, is Peace – "we are determined to foster

peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence" – and this establishes this theme of supporting peaceful, just and inclusive societies at the heart of our aspirations for humanity, in Goals 16, 10 and 5 in particular. This approach has been cited very widely, from peace and security to long term development. There is a real change being signaled here, as we saw with the November 2015 Security Council meeting that, for the first time ever, was held at the level of development ministers.

- In the four peace reviews – peace operations, peacebuilding architecture, woman peace and security and the last one, the New Deal – there has been an overwhelming emphasis on political approaches over military ones, and on prevention over intervention

- In Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace & Security – if you liked 1325 you'll love 2250 – we have seen a deliberate effort to effect a shift in perspective, from seeing youth as perpetrators or victims to being change agents for peace

- In the Secretary-General's Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism, which consistently emphasizes the need to address root causes, and

- In the report of the high level panel on humanitarian financing, and the Secretary General's report ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit, which essentially say that not only is the humanitarian system not working, but that there will never be enough resources to address the humanitarian need unless we start to get serious about prevention and the root causes of violence and displacement.

Putting the focus back on State actors

There are a number of downsides to the framing of 'countering' or preventing' violent extremism. One of them of course is the inappropriateness of classing many different types of violence together, ranging from what is clearly a war, and an ugly one, in the Middle East (with half a million dead and tens of millions of displaced) to smaller outbreaks of politicized violence, designed to shock and provoke outsized reactions.

But the most damaging impact of the 'violent extremism' framing is the way in which it diverts attention from the role of state actors. By focusing on the motivations and methods of non-state groups and individuals, the CVE and PVE frames largely leave to the side the critical role of states in

these situations. Yet no analysis of the situation in the Middle East, for example, is complete without taking into account the role of governments, including as direct perpetrators of violence, (often including violence against civilians), as external destabilizers of fragile situations through the imposition of exogenous security and political agendas, and in fostering the roots of violence through poor governance, exclusion, and violent suppression of dissent.

Additional concerns include the way in which too many governments have been restricting the space for civil society in their own countries and internationally in the name of 'counter-terrorism': and how the label of 'terrorist' has been used not only to exclude certain groups from peace processes, but also to prohibit any form of engagement by civil society with groups so labeled, whether humanitarian or peace-making in intent

Conclusion

What I set out to do is to fill in around the edges of the compelling arguments that Professor Esposito put to us.

As has I think been shown, the world is at a turning point, where we have a choice to be made, between fear and national interest, or hope and a shared, cooperative vision of the future.

The international community is ready for this discussion, with an emerging consensus on the need to focus on prevention, resilience and building peaceful, just and inclusive communities in a way that cuts across everything from peace & security to development, human rights and humanitarian action

We have noted that this work is already being done in countries around the world as we speak, albeit on a small scale – but we know what to do if we can engender the political will.

And above all, we have seen that Faith based organizations, with their deep history and experience of working on humanitarian and peace and justice issues, have an important role to play in this critical debate.

Thank you