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## رسالة مؤرخة 31 آذار/مارس 2021 موجهة إلى رئيسة مجلس الأمن من الممثلة الدائمة للمملكة المتحدة لبريطانيا العظمى وأيرلندا الشمالية لدى الأمم المتحدة

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الممثلة الدائمة للمملكة المتحدة لبريطانيا العظمى وأيرلندا الشمالية لدى الأمم المتحدة

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## I. Opening remarks

### United Kingdom

#### Remarks by Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Excellences, distinguished guests, good morning to you all and a warm welcome.

I am very honoured to begin this important conversation and would like to thank our co-sponsors, Estonia, Norway and the United States, for their support.

Despite some wonderful progress on the sustainable development goals, parts of the world continue to be afflicted by bitter conflict.

Conflict that brings death, illness, displacement and upheaval to the lives of men, women and children.

We know that religion and belief continue to be a factor in conflict, with religious persecution all too commonplace.

The personal costs are unacceptable, and the risks to international peace and security are huge.

Today's meeting will look at the lived experience of those engaged in protecting religious groups in armed conflicts and the role that religious actors can play in conflict resolution and peace processes. This is the critical role of the Council.

We will place particular emphasis on the situation in the Middle East where the Pew Research Center has consistently found religious hostilities to be very high.

I look forward to hearing the briefers today including, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby; Dr. Azza Karam; Ekhlal Khudur Bajoo; and Karim Khan.

In the face of violence, we continue to see religious actors step in; not step away. They are negotiators, mediators and conciliators.

Their commitment to securing peace, often in dangerous or hard-to-reach places, is not without risk.

We have brought this matter here today, in recognition of the need to protect members of religious and belief groups in conflict, and protect the incredible work that they do.

With that, I would like to respectfully invite our first breifer, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

## II. Briefers' remarks

### The Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury

Thank you Lord Ahmed and thank you to all of you for having me to this important discussion around the role of religious actors in peace processes, the report by my colleague, the bishop of Truro, and the recommendation around steps towards a Security Council resolution.

I'm deeply honoured to share with my fellow briefers whose distinction, courage and knowledge is beyond compare. And also I come as one of millions of members of religious or belief groups around the world whom we recognized today for their

huge contribution to peace processes. We all know that we meet amidst a time of great change in global crisis. I won't recapitulate on that. You know it better than I do. But I want to say that this is a time of choice, of opportunity, a moment where we can do the right thing for a better future, for the whole world, we are not doomed to descend into further darkness. I was privileged to speak to the United Nations Security Council in August 2018 about the role of faith communities and peace processes and to be back here today.

I have three key messages. First key message, faith communities know their people locally and around the world. I warmly encourage the United Nations to invite faith leaders to co-create and design peace processes from the outside and from the onset, rather than bringing them in later. That is essential. It brings them on board. In Upper Egypt, the Anglican Diocese of Egypt brings together young Muslim and Christian adults to do practical projects in the community, cleaning and painting schools, that sort of thing. In the pandemic, they visited isolated areas with food, set up children's activities, not an easy journey. And these and this travel can be awkward and even difficult, but common purpose and a shared vision brings all sides together. From community projects at the grassroots to high level advisers to presidents and prime ministers, religious or belief groups are connected, active and add enormous value.

Key message two, faith networks are there before conflict, during conflict and after conflict. The work is already happening. We thank the UN for inviting us to join with their work. And equally, we invite them to join with the work that we're already doing, in some cases for centuries. Religious belief groups that need to visit or send because they're already there, often for thousands of years. They are hugely invested because they will still be there afterwards when everyone has gone away and will live with the consequences of the process. For our sisters and brothers, this is not a task or project. This is a way of life and fundamental to expressing faith. Working from within a context of faith brings opportunity to explore the wisdom, to find healing and the power to forgive. For example, the Lebanese Christian woman in the Beqaa Valley, who 30 years ago saw her neighbour shot by a Syrian sniper, now runs a church organized school for Syrian children in exile. Thank you to the UN for their acknowledgement of this through the Mediation Support Unit Network. They do extraordinary work. Sometimes the most unlikely people are the most gifted. This is the nature of flourishing community. Women and men, especially women, all have crucial roles. When this works well, the powerless have the opportunity to influence the powerful.

And key message three, we must do this in partnership. Let's work together. We appreciate deeply any opportunity to work together. Our skills, our access and strengths are complementary. We need each other. We believe the United Nations must encourage member states to establish joint reconciliation units in their governance architecture. I rejoice that the UK government has done that. Such units in many countries could be funded and supported by the UN, owned by host nations, and provide a platform for the UN faith leaders, civil society, external extractive industry, World Bank, to work together, assess conflict, provide comprehensive solutions. Faith leaders can provide the neutrality, the distance of perspective, the worldview of protagonists and convening authority at grassroots to national level to seek solutions. I pay credit to the work by non-Christian faith communities. I remember a rabbi and a sheik in Israel and the occupied territories working together during the intifada to bring peace at great risk to both. Let us celebrate collaboration and the distinct role we can each play. Eighty-two per cent of the world population belongs to such a community. Together we can bring hope and change the world.

Thank you, your excellencies. I hand back to the Chair.

## **Dr. Azza Karam, Secretary General of Religions for Peace**

Thank you very much indeed, your Excellency.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the opportunity to be with you here today. And thank you, Your Eminence, Most Reverend Arch Bishop for the presentation you made, which takes away the need for me to say half of what I wanted to say. So thank you very much for that. I have the privilege of serving religions for peace, which in short, is the United Nations of religions, just as the United Nations has member states, religions for peace, as member religious institutions and representatives of faith communities around the world, all the way from the Holy See to the indigenous communities in different regions of the world. That is the organization I'm privileged to serve that has existed for 50 years. And based on the learnings of which I wish to share three points of relevance to this conversation today.

The first has to do with what the archbishop has very beautifully elaborated, which is the way of religions and the way of the multi religious. And if you'll allow me to quickly share seven truths and they are no pun intended, there are seven truths, but there's no pun intended. One, religious actors and religious leaders in particular, are social and cultural gatekeepers in all societies. So any transformation in behaviours or attitudes, social and cultural norms, actually needs religious leaders and institutions to speak from their respective pulpits. Kindly note, we are not looking at this from the perspective of Western Europe.

We are looking at this from the perspective of what the Pew Research Center in 2012 identified as 80 per cent of the world's people affiliating to a particular faith tradition. That means eight out of 10 people who are believers in something or other. The second very good reason is because, quite frankly, the religious communities, religious institutions and religious leaders are amongst the largest, oldest and most far reaching social service providers. We think of health, education, nutrition, environment, and these are not in any way, shape or form distinguished from peace and the need to build it and sustain it. These social services have been traditionally provided by religious institutions long before governments existed. Third, as the first responders in humanitarian crises, we know that at least four out of the top ten global humanitarian non-governmental actors today are religiously based and religiously inspired. Fourth, as heavily vested actors in and with politicians, political circles, political parties, religious leaders and indeed some movements and entire religious infrastructures today are partners in actions and spiritual advisers. Where they are not partners with the political leadership in many parts around the world, they are with the opposition to the existing structures of governance. Fifth, as the most creatively self-resourced institutions in the world, the network of volunteers is one of the largest human resource networks known to humankind, and they belong very much and work with different religious institutions and religious communities.

Six, if religions are identified as the source of terrorism, violence or extremism, which some religions tend to be more than others, then clearly the reasons given there already validated why it is important to work with the source, even if it is incorrectly cited or incorrectly referenced, or indeed unjustly so. All the more reason to work with the religious institutions and the religious actors from within the same realms. The seventh truth that we have learned after 50 years of multi-religious collaboration within Religions for Peace around the world, basing on examples within as far wide as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, the numbers are plenty, the contexts are plenty, multi-religious collaboration effectively minimizes and prevents the opportunity for any form of dogmatic or fundamentalist interpretation by any one

religious tradition. When religious actors come together on any given platform, the tendency is not towards extremism. The tendency is indeed towards a politically savvy, much more positively inclined competition to see which one of them is indeed the more enlightened than peace loving. Given that that is a proven experience globally, it makes sense for us to ensure that we are not only working one on one with different religious institutions and therefore as a United Nations context, risking appearing to validate or indeed to marginalize any particular religious tradition when the convening is multi-religious in nature, context and intentionality. And indeed, when it happens early on as part of a multi-stakeholder context, the opportunities for a discourse around peace are far more available than the opportunities for more fundamentalist and dogmatic stance ever can be.

Within these given seven truths, I would point and this is my second point, I would point to the example, unfortunately, of what we see happening in certain countries, which out of political sensitivity, I shall not name. But there is there are contexts in which the dynamics of conflict within the civilian population, particularly between the civil and military population conflagrates the minute that a table which brings together the different actors is no longer convened or no longer enabled. I refer in particular to context in Sri Lanka earlier on, as well as Myanmar today. But I think it is worthwhile noting that where we have excluded religious actors but highlighted religious extremism, we have ended up going absolutely nowhere very fast indeed.

Last and by no means least, I think there is an option to be said here for what the United Nations Security Council can do. And there are only two points that I would put on the table. There is about the list of 25 but I will spare you that.

Two points that would be incredibly helpful for multi-religious collaboration towards greater peacebuilding. One is the link between the development, the human rights and the peace and security space. There has been altogether too much emphasis and influence on one or the other. A linkage between these two can be evaluated and sustained through existing interreligious structures, as the archbishop said. And here I would actually counter slightly the need to create new structures. I would say look at the existing interreligious structures around the world. Religions for Peace alone has ninety-two interreligious councils in 92 countries and for regional interreligious structures. We can look at this as very critical sites with experience and legacy, not only of building peace through development and human rights advocacy and actual programmes and interventions, but indeed a site where the normalcy of multi religious coexistence has been made more and more the case. And second, I think the overemphasis on Islamic dynamics has been counterproductive and deeply unhelpful for all of us working in the multi-religious space.

Again, I refer to the archbishop and what he has said. There is in fact, a continuum of extremism in general, violent extremism to look at only one aspect of it, which is religious in nature or allegedly religious in nature. And then to narrow it down even further to an Islamic or one religious context is indeed deeply unhelpful for all. What the Security Council can do is what it does best, which is try at its best to set an example. The members of the Security Council have an opportunity to set an example for where extremism can be looked at as a continuum and not focused on as religious exclusively or indeed as one religion exclusively.

Thank you.

**Ekhlas Khudur Bajoo, Iraqi human rights activist  
(with interpretation from Jacqueline Isaac, human rights attorney)**

**Jacqueline Isaac:** My name is Jacqueline Isaac and I am a human rights attorney that travelled to Iraq during the height of the war in 2015. It was there that my life changed forever – it was there that I met my hero and my friend: Ekhlas Khudur Bajoo. Ekhlas was only 14 years old when she came out of ISIS captivity. We shared tears and we shared dreams. Her dream was to save her sisters out of captivity by raising her voice. She asked that I send her message around the world. I returned to testify before the US Congress to share that message, but then she and I reunited in person to speak in front of UK Parliament, United Nations, and joint efforts for the Declaration of Humanity for Leaders of Faith and Leaders of Belief. Without further ado, I would like to introduce you to my friend, Ekhlas.

**Ekhlas Khudur Bajoo (Jacqueline Isaac translating):** Hello everyone. My name is Ekhlas and I am from a minority community in Iraq. I am from the Yazidi faith. First, I want to thank Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby; Lord Ahmad; and attorney Jacqueline and all the people who have stood with us from the very beginning until now. I want to give special thanks to the Declaration of Humanity that was written for leaders of faith and belief, because it focuses on religious minorities and their protection. The future of religious minorities and victims is in your hands. I was one of the victims of ISIS. In August of 2014, ISIS came into Sinjar and seized the territory of the Yazidi people. It was there that ISIS killed thousands of Yazidi people. They kidnapped thousands more, many of which are still missing today. They kidnapped my family and killed my father before my very own eyes. It was then that they separated me from my mother and my family, because I was fourteen years old. They took me to the girls' market where I was among other girls from the ages of 8 to 28 years old. I was grouped among 5,000 girls – among them were also Christian girls. A man came and purchased me – he was a 34-year-old ISIS fighter. He took me and my friend to an ISIS training camp. It was there that he committed the most horrendous crimes against me – crimes I could never begin to explain in 5 minutes. On one dark night when he tried to attack me, I pleaded with him and I begged him. I cried: 'Please do not rape me. I am just a child. I am the age of your young sister or your daughter. Please do not do this to me. Do not rape me. Kill me, kill me, but do not rape me.' He responded: 'For you Yazidis and Christians, death is not enough. You must die while you are still living.' It was then that he tied me up and muzzled my mouth and I cried. I will never forget that night as long as I live. On that night, I called out to three names. I called out to God because I have faith in him; I called out to baba, my father; and I called out to the world to rescue me. ISIS did this to us simply because we are Yazidi and came from the minority of the Yazidi people. We had never done anything wrong to anyone, but they tried to break us. They tried to break us girls, but they could not break us. What was beautiful was that when we came out of captivity it was the Yazidi people that welcomed us with open arms. And the High Holy Leader Baba Sheikh was there to not only welcome us, but what was beautiful was, he called us saints. I was only 14-years-old when this happened to me – that I decided to live – and I did live. And today I want to tell you that my smile is my greatest weapon and I will fight and I will continue this fight with all of you today here with me. And we will fight together as leaders, we will hold hands, from all faiths and religions – I respect all faiths – and together we will stand. Thank you very much to everyone here today.

**Jacqueline Isaac:** And I want to thank you Ekhlas today for your powerful message and the strength you have for all of us to continue this fight.



**[Following statements from Security Council Member States' Representatives, EK made concluding remarks through the translations of Jacqueline Isaac]**

**Ekhlas Khudur Bajoo (Jacqueline Isaac translating):** I want to thank all of the nations and representatives of the nations who stood with us and supported us. I always say humanity comes before religion. Today humanity is what unites us. I always say that it is very important to understand that we were victims because we were Yazidi, and so there is a role for religions to play – even inside conflict. And the role of religious leaders is very important to send a message to protect and stand with victims and minorities. I have only told you a short part of my story, but I am encouraged that we are going to do something together – that we are going to stand together and unite together to mark history. This is going to require all of us. I have faith in each and every one of you. We all can do it together. From today, let us all agree to stand together for those who were captured, for those who are victims. I am so proud of each one of you for being here and being a part of this today. Thank you.

**Jacqueline Isaac:** Thank you Ekhlas. You are a hero to the entire world. You are our hero. Thank you for your bravery.

**Karim Khan QC, Special Adviser and Head of the United Nations Team investigating international crimes committed by ISIL/Daesh**

Minister, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a distinct honour to appear on this panel, and follow such distinguished, eminent speakers, and particularly humbling to follow such an eloquent, courageous woman that has just spoken. Ekhlas Badjo, every time I hear you speak, it is a very vivid manifestation of the need for plurality, religious freedom and also for people to hold on to faith.

In relation to the topic of today's discussion, I think the first remark is obvious, I hope to everybody, which is that in order to protect religious belief in conflict, we have to protect freedom of religion and belief before there is conflict. Conflict does not descend from the stars, it arises from the ground, from prejudice, from dark places, from mistrust, and misunderstanding.

Whether it is Da'esh in Iraq or other locations in the world, we see that when people are made fun of an account of how they dress, how they worship, how they believe, how they pray, in which direction they worship, that so often escalates from mockery to ostracization, to hatred, and then elevates into discrimination and persecution. The ultimate manifestation of that is this most un-Islamic state; Da'esh. I have had the honour, but also the terrible responsibility, with members of my team to speak to so many survivors amongst all religious communities in Iraq that have suffered and courageously continued to live and worship today, despite the best efforts of this Un-Islamic State to suffocate freedom of religion.

If we are to deal effectively with protection, I believe we need to have a greater understanding than perhaps we currently do, and to devise methodologies to ensure that freedom of religion and freedom of worship is not considered merely as a human right, essential though that is, but as an essential pillar of national security.

When we start separating and focusing on the other, we are divided as a State and as a community and it leads, as we see in different parts of the world, to violence. Whilst this meeting is of course focusing on the Middle East, throughout the world we see not just Islamophobia or Antisemitism, we see graves that are desecrated, we see churches and Synagogues and mosques and temples that are under attack and worshippers persecuted and targeted by people. We must realize that unless we have

intolerance of intolerance, unless we have some refusal to accept this preaching of hate, we will encounter other preventable situations.

The second point, again, I am sorry, it's not rocket science. We must recognize that religious leaders have a key role to play. I could not begin to compare the three points of the Archbishop of Canterbury and also of Dr. Azza Karam, but one question this discussion does raise is: who are the religious leaders? All that glistening is not gold, one cannot preach hate and then be involved in peace. It is a requirement upon decision makers, the United Nations, Member States, and the Council to involve in peace processes those that either have renounced violence and hate, or have never been involved in it in the first place. That would lead to some obvious incentives, if I can use that word, were the United Nations and other international or regional organizations to fully respect and leverage the key role of faith leaders. Hopefully this can be a further way of engendering more peace, collegiality, and interfaith dialogue in different parts of the world.

Minister, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In Iraq, we were confronted of course with massive criminality. I commend the Security Council for creating UNITAD in response to accounts such as Ekhlas Badjo, Nadia Murad and many others. Early on in our work we realized that the implementation of our mandate required everybody to be involved, there is no room for spectators. All accountability mechanisms must engage with NGOs and civil society.

I think the same reasoning compels that we engage with religious leaders, to hear what they have to say and how they can contribute to our work. They know the ground, they know their community, they are listened to, particularly in parts of the world such as Iraq. I have seen three prime ministers in my time in Iraq as well as moments when there was political paralysis in Government and Parliament was not sitting due to protests. To continue to progress our work it was essential to engage with religious leaders.

The role of religious leaders in public messaging that counters violence and promotes understanding should be highlighted in particular. When I met with Sayed grand Ayatollah Sayed Sistani, his first words, even before I was able to discuss any substantive issues were: "Take care of the Christians and the Yazidis". Following my meeting with the Sunni Council in Baghdad, the Head of the Jurisprudential Council was as good as his word and in the Friday Jum'a prayer encouraged members of the Sunni congregation to assist in the work of UNITAD. Cardinal Sako, Head of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq, along with other members of the Christian community has worked to ensure Kakai community leaders are fully engaged in interfaith partnerships in Iraq.

This type of approach has also led to more intensive dialogue, between the United Nations, represented by His Excellency and then Under-Secretary-General Adama Dieng and myself, and a range of religious leaders in Iraq. This has in turn led to the adoption of the historic Interfaith Statement on the Victims and Survivors of ISIL, which addresses not only the issue of accountability but the commonality of religions, the identification of common ground in which one finds the essence before piety. The basic essence must be kindness to each other.

The Interfaith Statement was not only historic moment, it is an important start in a process. I was delighted in July of this year to join with then Under-Secretary-General Adama Dieng and Ms. Azza Karam of Religions for Peace for a virtual meeting of Iraqi religious leaders who had endorsed the Statement, as well as those from other parts of the world. Building on this, in May 2021 of this year, along with the successor of Mr. Adama Dieng, Under-Secretary-General Alice Nderitu, UNITAD

is hosting the Interfaith Dialogue Series with different faith leaders across Iraq. I believe this is important as ultimately it is the development of common ground regarding religion that binds us together.

Minister, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would wish to conclude by making two concrete suggestions.

Firstly, let us mainstream religious leaders of faith and of peace into as many fora as possible. Such leaders are a luxury: they are not motivated by financial consideration or by turf, they want to be part of a solution to help the furtherance of civilization, based on their faith.

The second point that I would leave you with is the question of Terms of Reference and constituent instruments of United Nations entities. In the case of UNITAD, our Terms of Reference, agreed by the United Nations and the government of Iraq and endorsed by the Security Council, encouraged me to engage with community leaders, NGOs, individuals, and other actors. No mention of religious leaders.

It is probably a very simple thing to do to make it common practice: wherever possible: let us include religious leaders in the same breath whenever we include civil society and community leaders. This reflects a point raised by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the outset of these discussions: religious leaders should not be an afterthought, they must be a central part of the solution from the outset and indeed even before conflict takes place.

Thank you very much.

### **III. Host and co-sponsors' remarks**

#### **United Kingdom**

##### **Statement by Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the United Kingdom Minister of State responsible for Human Rights and the Prime Minister's Special Representative for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict.

In the course of my work, I have met a great number of people who have lived through faith-based violence and persecution, including Christian and Yazidi communities in Iraq, and seen the distressing impact that this has on the lives of ordinary people.

Religious violence and persecution can never be commonplace or routine. One man, woman or child, victim to such persecution in conflict is one too many.

The phenomenon is particularly prevalent at the hands of terrorist actors in the Middle East.

Undeniably, this situation poses a threat to international peace and security. As several Security Council resolutions have recorded, Daesh has committed mass atrocities against the Yazidis and other religious groups. Attacks, as Resolution 2249 stressed, that are 'driven on religious or ethnic grounds'.

Countries such as Iraq, Yemen and Libya should be a matter of profound concern.

The testimony shared by Ekhlas Bajoo makes it abundantly clear that the persecution of members of religious groups in conflict continues to be a significant issue for this Council's agenda.

These testimonies also underline the vital role that local and national religious actors can play in conflict resolution and in peace processes.

His Excellency the Archbishop of Canterbury addressed this Council in 2018. He was talking about mediation and conflict resolution when he said:

*Religious institutions are often the only functioning institution in a fragile or pre-conflict situation. They are present before, during and after conflict.*

It is that consistency that is really important.

We see that religious actors can find themselves among a small handful of trusted people. People who can offer a route out of conflict; who can bring the skills to mediate or negotiate, and build peace in the most stricken communities.

Religious actors often have their ears close to the ground, and they have the ear of the people. They have the knowledge and understanding to inform and strengthen negotiations.

As peacemakers, we would be remiss if we did not draw on those strengths to build inclusive and enduring peace agreements, and to work towards reconciliation.

In Iraq, where sectarianism and persecution of minorities has fuelled conflict over twenty years, religious actors have played an invaluable role, laying the foundations of a durable peace.

Earlier this month, Pope Francis visited Mosul to pray for the victims of the war, which left thousands dead. We warmly welcome his Excellency's visit and its contribution to interfaith dialogue.

Locally and nationally in Iraq, religious actors across different traditions wield huge influence. They have huge potential to move the country towards peace.

We have heard from our briefers about the role that religious actors can play in peace processes.

To add another example, the religious community of Sant'Egidio, in Italy, facilitated high and mid-level talks for Libya, which in 2016 produced a humanitarian access agreement and a joint declaration supporting UN-led peace efforts.

Working with religious actors can ensure that the voices of religious and belief minorities are heard. We must not allow those who suffered in conflict to suffer again in peacetime.

Peace is fully inclusive – or it is not peace.

In closing, let me express my admiration and my gratitude for all those who pursue a more peaceful world through their faithful work.

Sadly, the ongoing persecution means that religion, belief and conflict must remain matters of acute concern to the Council.

We will seek a Security Council resolution on this issue, and will continue to act against religious persecution, as long as anyone suffers for their beliefs.

## Estonia

### **Statement by H.E. Sven Jürgenson, Permanent Representative of Estonia to the United Nations**

We thank UK for today's discussion and the briefers for their interventions.

Freedom of religion and belief, including the right not to believe and to change one's religion or belief, is a fundamental human right.

It is universal. It is also indivisible from other human rights. This includes the right to life, the right to freedom of expression, and equality before the law without any discrimination.

The promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief as a universal human right and the elimination of discrimination, persecution and violence against persons on the basis of religion or belief is a priority for Estonia, including as a member of the European Union.

Estonia is a founding member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) and has been an active participant in its work. On 17 November 2020, the foreign ministers of the alliance adopted the Declaration on Safe Places of Worship, prepared by Estonia.

The Security Council has continued to call for all parties to conflict to respect their obligations under international law, including international human rights law and international humanitarian law to ensure the protection of all civilians in conflict. However, these calls continue to be ignored with civilians bearing a heavy toll in conflicts around the world.

Civilians can also be systematically targeted because of their national, ethnic or religious belonging. We have seen cruel and unforgivable examples of this around the world.

The Council has condemned the abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law by ISIL, which includes genocidal campaign against the Yazidis. This includes the crimes against Yazidi women and girls, whose suffering has not ended after the defeat of ISIL.

In Yemen members of the Baha'i community have been targeted since the start of the war in 2014. Throughout the years many members of the community have been detained and tortured, some condemned to death for their beliefs. Few Baha'is have been released; however, in exchange for their freedom they are forced to leave the country and live their life in exile.

The vulnerability of persons belonging to minorities is often combined with violence and discrimination based on gender. The Security Council has recognized conflict-related sexual violence as a weapon of war, often targeted against members of specific communities. This Council has heard multiple testimonies of the survivors of such violence and needs to continue to call for accountability for these crimes, without exception.

We need to get better in identifying the early signs and warnings of systematic attacks against persons on the basis of religion and belief. Incitement of hatred and violence and the violation of human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, need to be called out.

Cooperation between different stakeholders in the protection of civilians is essential. This includes the provision of assistance, building trust, raising awareness and advocacy to respect the norms of international law. Religious leaders, through

their role in communities, can contribute to that. They can also contribute to building trust and countering incitement.

We believe that today's discussion underlines the relevance of the protection of human rights for the maintenance of peace and security and the overarching obligation to protect civilians in armed conflict.

Thank you.

## Norway

### **Statement by H.E Mona Juul, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations**

A sincere thanks to our colleagues for hosting, and for the valuable insights from the panellists.

We appreciate the opportunity this meeting provides to highlight two topics which are central to Norway's international engagement: First, the importance of the protection of minority religious and belief groups in conflict settings, and second, the contribution of religious actors in peace processes.

Excellences, colleagues,

Experience in recent years has shown that members of minority religious and belief groups are particularly exposed during war and conflict. Several States do not comply with their obligations under international law to provide protection for religious groups. A lack of protection for, and attacks against, religious and ethnic minorities impedes efforts to resolve conflict and build inclusive and peaceful societies.

Advancing the protection of minorities in conflict should be a matter of concern for the Security Council. Indeed, several Council resolutions have already recognized the religious and ethnic aspects of the horrible atrocities committed against the Yazidis and other religious groups.

Not only must we work to prevent attacks, but also ensure accountability for violations of international humanitarian law, and human rights violations and abuses. Impunity contributes to conflicts, and perpetuates atrocities. Those responsible for atrocities must be held accountable through credible national or international criminal justice mechanisms. Accountability is crucial for long-term peace and reconciliation.

Thankfully we do have positive examples to draw on. Like in Iraq: The adoption of the Yazidi Survivors Law is an important step in acknowledging the impact on, and suffering of, the Yazidis and other minority communities, by introducing a number of reparation measures.

Colleagues,

As we know, the lack of protection for minorities – including respect for their religious convictions and practice – creates divisions in communities that are difficult to mend. We've unfortunately seen this in Yemen with the worsened situation for religious minorities, including followers of the Baha'i faith. We should all take note of how religious leaders globally often play a constructive role in facilitating, and ensuring humanitarian access, and promoting the protection of civilians.

This brings me to my second point on the contribution of religious actors in peace processes. In many contexts, religious leaders and institutions are well placed to influence conflict parties and reconcile divided communities. Involvement by

religious leaders can be vital in de-escalating conflict, and securing public support for negotiated solutions.

Especially women leaders – who can help identify ways to advance women’s equal rights and participation in all aspects of the peace process. And often to advance the protection for, and justice to, survivors of conflict related sexual, and gender based violence.

It is essential to understand the local context for peace and reconciliation. So the inclusion of all parts of civil society is important for peace efforts to succeed. There are many useful examples to learn from the involvement of religious actors in peace processes. From a Norwegian perspective, we’ve seen the added value of Norwegian Church Aid and the Ethiopian inter-religious council in promoting dialogue in local communities in Ethiopia, and the Council of Churches establishment of a national platform for dialogue in Zimbabwe. Pope Francis’s recent visit to Iraq is also a prime example of the potential of peaceful messages from religious actors. In a region marked by the heavy tolls of war, including devastated Christian communities, the meeting between Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was truly inspirational – sending a unified message on the need for peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and the right to protection.

To sum up colleagues: religious minorities in conflict settings must be protected, and we must make better use of religious actors. They can play an important role in fostering social cohesion, and reaching sustainable peace.

## **United States**

### **Statement by H.E. Linda Thomas Greenfield, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations**

Thank you. And let me start by thanking the briefers for sharing your valuable perspectives and insights. And I want to thank the United Kingdom for organizing today’s important and timely event.

Religious freedom, including choosing not to practice or believe, is a fundamental freedom, and it’s one that we have enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. We hold it among our highest values.

No one should fear violence, or persecution, for their beliefs. But today, this basic right is threatened in so many places around the world – including Iraq and Syria, Ethiopia, Burma, China, and Nigeria, just to name a few.

In Iraq and Syria, ISIS has perpetrated atrocities against Yezidis, Christians, Muslims. This violence has forced millions to flee their homes. ISIS has killed, maimed, and tortured others, and forced more than 3,000 Yezidi women and girls into sexual slavery.

The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria recently reported that militant groups continue to kill, kidnap, unlawfully detain, and torture members of religious and ethnic minorities in Syria. They are also vandalizing and desecrating minority religious and cultural sites, including the Yezidi religious sites.

The United States is committed to alleviating the humanitarian crisis facing Iraqi and Syrian survivors of these atrocities and is supporting efforts to hold those responsible accountable.

We also support initiatives to promote the safe and voluntary return of displaced Iraqis to their home communities. We must all work together to achieve justice and dignity for these religious and ethnic minority communities.

In Ethiopia's Tigray region, we remain deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian and human rights crisis. Reports indicate many of the forces operating in Tigray, including Eritrean troops, are committing abuses in Axum. Axum is Ethiopia's holiest city and home to Ethiopia's most sacred Orthodox church.

We call for a full independent investigation into all reports of atrocities. And we also call for the departure of Eritrean troops from the Tigray region, and accountability for the victims of these and other attacks during this conflict.

And in Nigeria, the situation continues to concern us. Long-standing economic clashes, corruption, and ethnic tensions are fuelling more conflict. While religion plays a factor in these tensions, too often it is weaponized by malignant actors to justify secular goals.

We also remain deeply concerned about abuses and persecution of members of religious communities outside of conflict settings.

In Iran, we reiterate our strong opposition to the government's severe violations and abuses of religious freedom. Members of unrecognized religious minority groups, including Baha'i and Christian converts, are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and unjust imprisonment.

In Burma, those who led the military coups are many of the same individuals responsible for abuses against members of Burma's religious and ethnic minority groups, including atrocities against the Rohingyas.

We have also seen worrisome signs of the Burmese military specifically targeting Muslim members of the National League for Democracy, as part of its broader crackdown on civil society leaders and activists.

In China, the Chinese Communist Party actively suppress the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities of its citizens belonging to religious minority groups, including and particularly Muslims in Xinjiang.

Among their many abuses, Chinese government authorities have detained more than one million predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and members of their ethnic and religious minorities inside of internment camps. There, authorities beat, torture, and forcibly sterilize detainees and force them to renounce Islam.

In all of these countries we are seeing tragedy instead of tolerance. We must work to protect the rights of religious minorities at every turn. Especially because, in the best cases, religions can be a unifying force for peace. Religious and faith-based organizations often play vital roles in the delivery of health care and education in communities.

Religious actors are close to their communities; they are often trusted and have local credibility. They can create positive change, and we support them in efforts to do so. And they deserve to be able to pursue those peaceful ends without fearing for their safety.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss this important issue today, and we hope that the Security Council will continue to consider ways to advocate for the rights of members of religious minority communities. It is up to us to protect freedom of religion or belief wherever it is threatened.

Thank you, Madam President.



## **IV. Interventions by members of the Security Council**

### **Tunisia**

#### **Statement by H.E. Ali Cherif, Deputy Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations**

At the outset, I would like to welcome H.E Lord Ahmad, UK Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, for chairing the meeting. I also thank the briefers for their very instructive and insightful presentation.

Mr. Chair,

Today, we are considering a very important issue related to the protection of members of religious and belief groups in conflict. The rights and security of religious minorities during conflicts must be closely examined in light of recent developments. While several conflicts on the Security Council agenda involve violence based on religion or belief, it is essential to think on ways and means to protect religious minorities all over the world.

Mankind history is full of sad examples where religious minorities have been targeted in conflicts. Women, children, and the most vulnerable people were assaulted driven on religious or ethnic grounds.

All religions promote peace, love, and mercy and it is of paramount importance to disseminate understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. Religious diversity in all communities must be affirmed as a source of enrichment and friendship among peoples. In the same vein, religious actors bear responsibility to condemn all acts of violence and terrorism as being against the spirit of all true religion, they have to commit themselves to promote speeches of peace and tolerance. The issue of violence against religious minorities must also be in the heart of the interfaith dialogue. We believe that religious actors shall involve actively in a dialogue to propose solutions in order to eliminate all form of discrimination on the grounds of religion and play an important role in peacebuilding process.

On the other hand, the international community must impose due respect to international law and fight impunity. It is our common responsibility to take decisive action to prevent, criminalize, investigate, prosecute, and ensure accountability of those who are targeting minority religious groups.

Mr. Chair,

My delegation strongly condemns the assaults against religious minority and expresses its solidarity with all the victims. We believe that international community must stand for justice and reparation and bring all perpetrators of the attacks committed by Daesh for a mass killing of at least 5,000 Yazidis.

Thank you.

### **Kenya**

#### **Statement by H.E. Mike Kiboino, Deputy Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations**

Thank you Chair,

Kenya thanks The Most Reverend and Right Honourable Justin Welby, Mr. Karim Khan QC, Professor Azza Karam, and Ekhlas Bajoo for their important briefings.

The very first line of the preamble to Kenya's Constitution acknowledges the supremacy of the Almighty God of all Creation. It reflects that faith and religious practice are at the core of our identity as a nation. The Constitution goes on to assert the right of religious belief, practice and assertion, while separating the church from the state, to better protect this precious freedom.

It came as a shock to the Kenyan people, as it did to the whole world, the depravations against the Yazidi people, and others, at the hands of ISIS. We witnessed our values as a people under vicious assault, and understood even better, why fellow travellers to ISIS, such as As Shabaab, are such a danger to all we hold dear.

For this reason, Kenya applauds the Security Council for passing resolutions that specifically recognize the link between the atrocities committed by ISIS and its perversion of faith.

It leads us to argue, as other delegations have, that these groups pose a clear and present threat to international peace and security, and that they must be opposed to every asset available to member states and the UN.

It is for this reason that Kenya has argued in multiple forums, on the importance of defeating the appeal of these groups message. Education curricula and other tools of training and instruction must be brought to bear to reinforce the freedom of religion as a value to be embraced by all people, everywhere.

Religious leaders therefore play a crucial role. There are those who are extremists bent on radicalizing their followers and providing recruits and justification to violent extremists. We heard and read their words in those terrible years that ISIS held territory.

Then there are those religious leaders who stand for the opposite. For respecting all religions, and for peaceful reconciliation of conflicts. Kenya has been privileged to have such leaders as an integral part of our national efforts to promote cohesion and peace. We believe that such religious leaders help us embrace the better angels of our nature by using their pulpits to build bridges and foster peaceful coexistence.

Their counterparts are as we have this meeting offering hope to the people of South Sudan. The mediation process by the community of Sant'Egidio, taking place in Naivasha in Kenya, is the most recent example of the transformative role religious leaders can play.

In line with today's meeting, Kenya proposes the following ways in which religious actors can contribute to peace processes:

- (a) Their participation in post-conflict peacebuilding using Track II diplomacy;
- (b) Their leadership in teaching and advocating for the texts, ideas and values that run counter to the message of religiously-framed violent extremism conducive to terrorism;
- (c) Promotion of religious dialogue between and within religions that builds bridges of understanding and respect;
- (d) Their encouragement of inclusive and peaceful political competition. The winner-take-all model of political competition is dangerous to emerging and divided societies. Religious leaders can help promote a more inclusive political culture;

(e) The UN can do more to invite religious leaders who have been instrumental in the positive progress of a peace process as briefers and experts.

It is important for peacekeeping missions and member state security services do their utmost to protect the brave voices of religious leaders who take a stand against violent extremists. The first line of protection should be based on institutional and legal frameworks since they create responsibilities for protection.

The protection measures should include, but not be limited to respect for the freedom of religion, particularly as manifested in the protection of places and instruments of worship, and respect by all parties for each other.

I thank you.

## **Russian Federation**

### **Statement by H.E. Vassily Nebenzia, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations**

Madame President,

We thank all today's briefers.

The issue of countering religious intolerance is one of Russia's priorities. Our country pays close attention to preventing religion-based discrimination, persecution of worshipers and religious leaders. In our view, these problems should be considered in a comprehensive manner, with equal approaches to all world's traditional religions.

Representatives of different cultures and religions have been living side by side in Russia for many centuries. Russian multi-national and multi-religious society, based on the principle of mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding, can be considered as a good model.

Russia consistently stands for establishing global cooperation in the area of ensuring interreligious peace and stability, in the first place in multi-religious communities.

In May 2022, in cooperation with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations, Russia will host the World Conference of Heads of States, Parliamentarians and Representatives of the World Religions on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue for the Benefit of Peace and Mankind. The format of the conference provides for the direct dialogue between governments, legislators, and religious leaders. We are convinced that it will make a meaningful contribution to achieving common understanding and harmony between representatives of different religions.

Russia is active at the religion-related track of the work of the United Nations, Council of Europe, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The United Nations, including the Third Committee of the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, pays much attention to the religious agenda. These bodies regularly adopt resolutions on religious freedom and countering religious intolerance. As for the culture of peace, the General Assembly adopts annually a range of resolutions designed to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue, where Russia often acts as a co-sponsor. But we have to state with regret that in December 2020, a number of Western countries refused to support UNGA resolution [75/26](#), because it envisaged measures against religious contempt which did not comply with their commitment to absolutize the freedom of expression, which proves that despite all the goodwill, adopting such documents still remains a very sensitive subject.

Madame President,

The situation of Christians in the Middle East, who have been part of that landscape and have lived there for millennia, raises grave concern, as well as the situation of Yazidis. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, a huge number of Christians, amounting, according to various estimates, to at least 1 million people, were forced to leave the region.

Despite the defeat of ISIL in Syria, a number of its regions, in particular the Idlib de-escalation zone, remain affected by the terrorist operations of “Jabhat al-Nusra”. Elimination of the hotbed of terrorism in Idlib and progress with political settlement in Syria based on respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria would contribute to sustainable improvement of the status of Christians.

In the context of promoting Syria’s post-conflict recovery, we would like to highlight the efforts of Russian religious leaders. Russia’s Presidential Council for Coordination with Religious Organizations established an Interreligious Working Group on the relief to the Syrian population. The WG provides humanitarian assistance, restores social infrastructure facilities, i.e. schools, hospitals, and sanctuaries.

To support Syria’s efforts in preserving its ethnic and religious balance and diversity, Russia helps organize regular meetings of heads of Syria’s religious communities and confessions.

Since terrorists were defeated in Iraq, the situation of the Christian minority, unfortunately, has not seen any significant improvement. The lack of relevant infrastructure deters the return of Iraqi Christians to their desired places of residence. Most of the churches and monasteries of Mosul’s Christian community still lie in ruins.

Madame President,

The issue of persecution is characteristic not only of the Middle East. It goes around the globe and, paradoxically, also finds its place in Europe. We remain concerned over the situation with the faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine. Direct interference of Kiev’s authorities in church affairs for the sake of narrow political goals continues to sow discord among Ukrainian Orthodox Christians. Political games around the autocephaly and pressure on believers which is envisaged by Law 4128 of Ukraine make the worshipers go through hard times. Hostile seizure of parishes of Ukraine’s Canonical Orthodox Church has been legitimized, whereas its laity and clergy encounter physical intimidation coming from local radicals. During the coronavirus pandemic, the local Media launched large-scale campaign to discredit the laity and clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, labelling them as “the source of the virus”. Established facts of attacks on the worship sites, the priests and the congregation are registered by the international human rights monitoring mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. However, the officials in Kiev keep ignoring the Mission’s assessments and conclusions.

Thank you.

## **Niger**

### **Statement by H.E. Abdou Abarry, Permanent Representative of Niger to the United Nations**

Madam President,

I would like to begin by congratulating the United Kingdom for organizing this meeting under the “Arria formula”, on a theme which is the subject of much debate.

Religious persecution in armed conflicts, which constitutes a threat to international peace and security, has now become a global problem that requires a number of measures to address.

Madam President,

In accordance with Article 8 of the Constitution of the 7th Republic of November 25, 2011, which enshrines the separation of state and religion, my country Niger, respects and protects beliefs, ensures equality before the law without distinction of sex, social, racial, ethnic or religious origin.

The Sahel region to which my country belongs, like the Middle East and other parts of the world, is today plagued by terrorist activities, which use religion as a motive for their action, to pillage, destroy and kill.

These followers of this ideology of evil, whose attachment to religious principles is only a pretext, take advantage of the absence of the State to establish their hegemony, often enough by means of trafficking of all kinds.

Madam President,

My delegation would like to recall that in Africa, transitional justice processes in certain States have benefited from the multi-faceted support of religious leaders, whose credibility and political neutrality have made it possible to put in place mechanisms aimed at settling violent conflicts that had lasted for several years.

To this end, religious leaders are guided by the sociological reality of their country, a real tool that allows them to play their role of social awareness in favour of reconciliation.

Through the promotion of the values of forgiveness and tolerance, they contribute to making religious diversity a bridge, rather than a wall between different communities.

Madam President,

In order to carry out their mission in the service of the community, religious leaders must engage in an approach which, by putting man at the centre of its concerns, integrates the gender dimension, because no community can promote peace by ignoring the efforts of its largest component.

Women must be involved in all stages of the peace process. Whether in the Sahel region, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen or Libya, to name but a few, women are the first victims of violence and discrimination and are thus the most likely to embrace peace.

Therefore, it is essential that religious leaders integrate the gender dimension in their approaches, because a peace that is not nourished by equality, justice and inclusion cannot be sustainable.

In addition to religious leaders, the peace processes in certain regions of Africa, such as the Sahel, have demonstrated the eminently positive role played by traditional chiefs, who are also, quite often, religious reference points. Whether in Niger or

Burkina Faso, their involvement in peace negotiations has demonstrated their effectiveness, due to the respect that their notoriety gives them.

Madam President,

The processes of interfaith dialogue carried out by the representatives of the major religions, which have also demonstrated their effect in reducing divergences, often sparked by ignorance, also deserve to be encouraged.

My delegation believes that the United Nations can support the effective participation of religious leaders through conferences, forums and other training and awareness-raising events:

- Their participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of specific UN programmes could help ensure that their input is taken into account
- The promotion of their participation in decision-making through their integration in public life, at the national, regional, or local level, in particular through bodies that provide advisory or consultative services, should be promoted
- Measures to expand access to jobs, and educational programmes for religious leaders, when properly targeted, could enable these leaders to play their full role.

Finally, and considering the current terrorist threats, the Security Council must take into account the religious dimension that exists in most conflicts, so as to better promote successful and lasting solutions to crises.

Thank you very much.

## **Viet Nam**

### **Statement by H.E. Dang Dinh Quy, Permanent Representative of Vietnam to the United Nations**

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At the outset, I would like to thank the United Kingdom for convening this meeting and the briefers for their presentations.

Mr. Chair,

Religion and belief have played a significant role in enhancing mutual understanding, tolerance and respect, as well as promoting peace and relations among people of different cultural, religious and national backgrounds. However, in countries where rampant religious hatred has motivated severe hostility, security and harmony are at threat. Not only has this incurred death and economic losses but also undermined the international efforts to world peace and security. Religious hatred may stem from both internal and external factors, including, but not limited to, poverty unemployment, unequal access to public religious spaces, and inadequate regional or international religious environments.

Therefore, first, States should comprehensively tackle the root causes of conflicts and religious hatred, address the intertwined links of poverty, inequality and justice, promote reconciliation for durable peace and sustained development, and combat intolerance, discrimination, violence incitement, specifically those based on religion or belief. Second, favourable conditions should be created for people to participate in diversified spiritual and cultural activities at a local, regional, national and global level, which is conducive to peace, stability and in accordance with

national and international law. Third, inter-faith dialogue and cooperation should be further strengthened as they are the most effective measures to reduce misunderstandings, differences and intolerance across communities.

Mr. Chair,

In Viet Nam, 54 ethnic groups, each with different beliefs linked to their respective material and spiritual lives, are living together peacefully and harmoniously. Lofty values and fundamental principles of religion that stand for non-violence, peaceful existence and tolerance have been deeply integrated into the everyday life of the Vietnamese people. Religious practitioners have significantly contributed to maintaining and preserving the well-being and stability of Vietnamese society through all time periods, be it war or peace. Our government has been doing its best to facilitate religion and belief-based practices, while promoting unity, harmony and ensuring equality and non-discrimination among all people.

In conclusion, we commit to work unanimously towards the common good, towards a world free from violence and hatred, and towards peace, harmony and tolerance among all beings.

I thank you.

## **India**

### **Statement by H.E. Nagaraj Naidu, Deputy Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations**

Madam President,

At the very outset, I would like to thank the delegation of the United Kingdom for organizing this meeting and to the speakers for sharing their insights on this issue. Our views on the Arria format of meetings are well known and we do not wish to see this platform being misused for narrow political interests.

Madam President,

My country is home to everyone and more of the world's religions. India is not just the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, but is also the land where the teachings of Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism have taken strong root and where the Sufi tradition of Islam has flourished since centuries.

The civilizational ethos of India is aptly described in the words of the great Indian philosopher, Swami Vivekananda who said, "We believe not only in universal toleration but accept all religions as true".

Madam President,

I also represent a country which, for millennia, has provided shelter to waves of refugees seeking refuge in India whether Zoroastrians or Tibetans or Sri Lankan Tamils or from erstwhile East Pakistan when the Bangladeshis faced persecution or from other countries. They have all been welcomed in India. The tradition of tolerance and pluralism gives India its unique cultural and civilizational identity.

We believe that pluralism is a fundamental pillar for an open, harmonious and progressive society. Our understanding and practice of pluralistic traditions was well articulated in the words of Mahatma Gandhi when he said, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Madam President,

Religion is a private matter for the individual, and there can be no denying that it plays an important role in the spiritual and moral guidance of humankind. The teachings of major religions reveal their almost universal focus on humanity, compassion, peace, social justice and the divinity of all beings.

While acknowledging that religious institutions in certain situations have played a positive role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and that their moral authority can be force for good, the reverse can be equally true in instances where religious factions have festered discontent along communal lines that has resulted in conflict. Therefore, involvement of religious institutions in UN-led peace efforts can be a tendentious terrain and we need to tread with caution, discernment and wisdom.

Madam President,

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy “freedom of speech and belief” and “freedom from fear and want” as the highest aspiration of the common people. Consequently, protection of these inalienable rights should be the highest aim of all governments irrespective of the religion, faith and beliefs of its citizens.

India has worked consistently to bring these ideals into reality. The Constitution of India guarantees to all its citizens the right to freedom, including the freedoms of religion, belief, faith and worship, of assembly and of movement. It guarantees the right to equality including equality before the law and prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race and sex.

It is when some states that deliberately chose NOT to provide these fundamental safeguards to its citizenry or promote dogma of religious exclusivity, that situations arise when religion is misused by the misguided to target religious icons and sites, attack worshipers, and foster terrorist attacks.

Therefore, the notion of using religion as a means of diplomacy in conflict resolution should be treated with utmost caution.

There can be no doubt that terrorism, which is a manifestation of intolerance and violence, is the antithesis of all religions and cultures. It is time that member states take a firm stand against countries that are trying to weaken our collective resolve to fight terrorism and even provide a justification for the heinous acts committed by terrorists. We also call on all countries which sponsor persecution of religious minorities to eschew such practices and embrace pluralism and democracy.

Madam President,

It is important that we collectively foster a genuine dialogue between civilizations and not just between religions. The last thing we need now is polarization on the basis of religion when the challenges we face are common and there is a greater need than ever to come together with harmony and understanding. The UN cannot afford to take sides when it comes to involvement of religion in our work.

Let us build peace together. Let us bring harmony into diversity, rather than division into unity.

Treating all religions equally or the concept of “Sarv dharm Sambhav” has been the guiding edifice of Indian ethos since India’s inception.

I Thank you Madam President.



## France

### Statement by H.E. Nathalie Broadhurst, Deputy Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations

Mr. Chair/Madam President,

Let me first thank the panellists for their useful interventions on this important topic.

Several conflicts on the Security Council's agenda involve violence based on religion or belief, including the situations in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, where individuals continue to have their rights violated because of their religious affiliation or beliefs.

All these communities embody the diversity of the Middle-Eastern societies that Daech precisely wanted to wipe out. In this regard, I recall the commitment of France, which organized a ministerial meeting of the UNSC in March 2015 and hosted with Jordan the first international conference on the subject in Paris in September 2015.

The need for protection in armed-conflict settings for members of religious/belief groups is real. Religious discrimination, calls for violence by local actors or national authorities, and aggressive religious discourse may precede the onset of armed conflict.

We must therefore work collectively to better prevent violations of individual rights, based on religious affiliation or belief. In addition to the fight against terrorist groups listed by the Security Council, the protection of minorities in Iraq, Yemen and Syria in particular must remain one of the main objectives. Preventing acts of violence also means fighting against hate speech and the use of the internet by terrorist actors.

Human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent. Where freedom of conscience is violated, other rights are often violated as well, especially during conflicts. The prevention of violations based on religion or belief is therefore closely linked to the protection of all human rights.

France will continue to ensure that the PKOs encompass human rights and protection of civilians in robust mandates. We also supported the adoption of resolution [2347 \(2017\)](#) on the protection of cultural heritage in the context of conflicts, including religious sites and objects. We must not forget that the Fourth Convention on the Protection of Civilian does include specific provisions related to respect for the religious beliefs and practices. In this respect, I commend the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the ICRC and NGOs, which are in the best position to identify the warning signs of religious tensions on the ground. We call on religious actors to play a positive role in conflict prevention and resolution.

Finally, we know that only a comprehensive political solution will allow a sustainable and peaceful solution for persons belonging to minorities. This is why we believe that the international community must support the consolidation of States that are not the defenders of a single community, but the guarantors of the coexistence of all the components of society through their respect of the rule of law and Human rights. We remain convinced that sectarianism is the breeding ground for extremism. Only inclusive States that protect diversity and guarantee full citizenship to everyone are capable of restoring the confidence of all components of society.

The fight against the impunity of all perpetrators of crimes must be fully integrated into efforts to stabilize, rebuild and reconcile all components of middle-eastern societies, which are the key to preventing any resurgence of Daesh.

France supports national and international efforts to document and gather evidence on massive human rights violations against persons belonging to minorities. This is why we have supported the establishment of investigation mechanisms for Syria and Myanmar as well as the establishment of the United Nations Investigation Team (UNITAD) in Iraq.

We also support the work of all relevant jurisdictions to determine accountability in the context of crimes committed against persons belonging to religious minorities. The perpetrators of these crimes must be held accountable.

Thank you.

## **Ireland**

### **Statement by H.E. Bryan Flynn, Deputy Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations**

Madame Chair, thank you for convening this thought-provoking conversation. We appreciated hearing the briefers' first-hand experiences, which provide an opportunity for all of us to reflect on religion, belief and conflict. And I also wanted to thank Ekhlās in particular. It can't have been easy for you to share your story, but it is so important we hear it.

Throughout history, the interplay between religion or belief, power and conflict has marked our world in profound ways. Far too often, minorities – including religious or belief groups – have borne the brunt of violence and persecution, with the tragic consequences so familiar to us all. Ireland condemns in the strongest possible terms all acts of violence, intimidation or persecution perpetrated against any individual or group on the basis of their religion or belief. Equally, we condemn all those who seek to invoke religion or belief as a justification for the commission of atrocities.

Tolerance, inclusion, and respect for diversity are antibodies that help to build and protect healthy societies and inoculate us against violence and persecution. We know that human rights violations and abuses frequently prove to be early warning indicators for conflict. Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and importantly the right not to believe, foretell of exclusionary politics that establish hierarchies of rights-holders within society. Too often, this extends beyond religious intolerance to intolerance on other grounds of difference, whether gender, sexual orientation and identity, race or ethnicity, or migration status. We have seen, again and again, that persecution of any type can be an early warning sign of mass violence.

Human rights are universal and indivisible. Hierarchies of humanity, artificially constructed according to categories of belonging and exclusion, can never be tolerated.

Guaranteeing rights – including the exercise of freedom of expression, association, assembly, religion or belief – and respecting diversity in all its forms, is the bedrock on which we can build peace and stability.

On the island of Ireland, we have learned the importance of tolerance and non-discrimination. The concept of “parity of esteem” enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which affirmed that government in Northern Ireland would be exercised “with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions”, has underpinned over twenty years of peace.

Members of the clergy worked tirelessly as mediators throughout the conflict in Northern Ireland, including by providing a space for difficult conversations behind

closed doors. The decommissioning of paramilitary weapons in Northern Ireland was independently verified by two members of the clergy, Fr. Alec Reid and Rev. Harold Good – a task emblematic of their trusted position in society.

Religious leaders have also contributed to post-conflict reconciliation and healing and continue to do so today.

Religious and faith-based actors, like other civil society actors, including women leaders, can make a transformative contribution to peacebuilding precisely because of their position outside the conflict. Civil society actors, through their deep roots in their communities, can win over populations to the cause of peace and bring protagonists to the table. It is surely self-evident that we cannot rely only on the parties to a conflict to build shared, sustainable peace. In Ireland's view and in our experience, peace processes, if they are to be successful, must be inclusive.

When we talk about the role of religious actors in peace, we must take care to ensure a pluralistic approach anchored in civil society, and to avoid privileging certain voices over others. The voices of women must be present at all levels and stages of peacebuilding. We must also acknowledge that members of religious or belief groups are not homogenous, and can themselves face multiple forms of discrimination.

Madam Chair, to conclude – to improve its effectiveness, this Council must better integrate human rights analysis into its work, so that early warning on human rights violations including against religious or belief groups can translate into early action and prevention. Let us make better use of the tools available to us: international humanitarian and human rights law provide us with the framework to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is respected in all circumstances, including in situations of armed conflict. All parties to conflict must comply with their obligations under IHL including to respect religious convictions and practices, and protect places of worship.

Thank you once again for bringing this important issue to the attention of the Council.

## **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**

### **Statement by Ms. Isis Gonsalves, Political Coordinator of the Permanent Mission of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations**

Thank you Ambassador Woodward,

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines welcomes today's discussion and we thank the United Kingdom for convening this meeting. We also thank the briefers for their insightful presentations.

People of all religions and beliefs, no matter their class, gender, or ethnicity should be allowed to express their beliefs without fear of discrimination or persecution. Refugees, internally displaced persons, and those who are stateless should also be free to practice their faith, in safety and security. The fundamental liberties of thought, conscience and religion, ascribed to all persons under international humanitarian and human rights law, must be protected in conflict settings – no matter the circumstances.

When persons are targeted solely on the grounds of their religion or belief; when they are punished for practicing their faith; when they are forcibly converted, or coerced into any act forbidden by their religion – these actions may amount to war crimes and must be thoroughly investigated and perpetrators held to account. When these "outrages upon personal dignity" are committed on such a scale that they may

threaten international peace and security, the Security Council is obligated to respond in order to save lives. The persecution of the Yazidis and other religious groups by ISIL is but one egregious example.

Religious leaders, through their community engagements, have a significant role to play in conflict settings by providing mediation, promoting tolerance, and fostering trust and social cohesion amongst stakeholders. When involved in peace processes, religious leaders and faith-based organizations can assist conflict-affected communities to mend their social fabrics by facilitating inter-faith dialogue and advancing inclusivity as a social norm, while safeguarding local cultures and traditions. The Sant'Egidio Community's valuable contributions to the South Sudan peace process serves as testament to the critical role of faith-based organizations. We have also borne witness to the papal encyclical which calls for swift and united action on Climate Change – which remains a key driver of conflict and instability globally. And today, we are pleased to have heard from the Archbishop of Canterbury on his noble efforts to promote mediation and reconciliation.

All parties to conflict must ensure that religious personnel are respected and protected during active hostilities. Religious and sacred sites, including places of worship, monuments, burial grounds, or other cultural property should be regarded as neutral territory; and should never be subjected to any form of attack, occupation, or otherwise utilized in military operations.

In conclusion, our delegation reaffirms that freedom of thought, conscience and religion are intricately connected to the Sustainable Development Goals. Our common promise of leaving no one behind will only be fulfilled when people of all creeds are free to practice their spiritual or religious beliefs, in dignity and in equality. I thank you.

## **China**

### **Statement by Mr. Sun Zhiqiang, Political Coordinator of the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations**

Mme Chair,

I thank the United Kingdom for convening this meeting. I also thank the briefers for their remarks.

The atrocities committed by Daesh against the Yazidi communities are appalling. China strongly condemns these atrocities.

No form of religious persecution should be tolerated. The freedom of religion should be respected and protected.

Challenges related to religion and belief do exist in certain conflicts. However, The nexus between religion, belief and conflict is complex. There needs a holistic and appropriate approach to this issue.

After listening to the remarks of other colleagues, I would like to share a few points.

First, every conflict is unique and context-specific. Different conflict has different root causes and drivers. In the Middle East, we see foreign interference, military occupation, unilateral coercion, political and sectarian competition, economic slowdown, social inequality, famine, and etc. All these factors are contributing to tensions and conflicts. The role of religion in driving conflicts should be assessed with caution.

Second, all men are born equal, and every life should be cherished. States bear the main responsibility to protect civilians and safeguard the rights of nationals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, occupation, class, or social status.

Third, the most effective way to protect civilians in conflict is to end the conflict itself. In this regard, political and diplomatic means should be given priority in the work of the Security Council, to promote inclusive and sustaining peace for people affected by conflict. While promoting the peaceful settlement of the conflict, the international community should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries concerned, and support countries to find their solutions based on national conditions.

Fourth, religious freedom is out of the purview of the Security Council's core mandate. In the UN system, we do have well-established mechanisms other than the Security Council to deal with religious issues – the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, the UN Alliance of Civilizations. These mechanisms should continue to be the main venue for religious issues.

Fifth, for the Security Council, one way it can play a role to protect religious freedom is to strengthen its efforts against terrorism and extremism. We see a lot of terrorist groups are inspired by the distorted teaching of religious belief. Member states should continue to keep a high alert against all terrorist entities and individuals listed by the Security Council and take measures to combat terrorism in any form. Double-standard should have no place.

Mme. Chair,

Let me also respond to the remarks by the US Ambassador. I understand the intention of the Chair is to have the Middle East as the backdrop of today's discussion. But unfortunately, the US Ambassador mentioned Xinjiang and made groundless slander against China, to which China is firmly opposed.

The Chinese government protect our citizen's freedom of religious belief in accordance with law. Chinese people of all ethnic groups enjoy full freedom of religious belief.

By contrast, ethnic minorities in the US, including Muslims, find themselves in a worrisome situation with regard to religion. The US has a long-standing problem of systemic racism. According to poll results by Gallup and Pew Center, 75 percent of Muslims in the US believe they are under serve discrimination due to their religion.

We urge the US to pay attention to its own problems and stop interfering in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of religion.

Thank you, Mme. Chair.

## **Mexico**

### **Statement by Mr. Bruno Rios, Political Coordinator of the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations**

Thank you, Excellency.

Mexico thanks the United Kingdom and the co-sponsors for convening this meeting, and the briefers presentations. We are confident that the views exchanged today will allow for advancing efforts in the prevention of violent extremism conducive to terrorism and ensuring sustained peace.

The deplorable actions carried out by Daesh in Syria and Iraq underline the urgent need to generate and promote effective and comprehensive strategies aimed at

countering their activities, their means of financing, recruitment strategies and at bringing those responsible for such heinous crimes to justice. But more importantly, they force us to look at the root causes that led to such atrocities so that we do not replicate negative patterns of conduct that fuel spirals of violence.

Violence that is driven on religious or ethnic grounds is not limited to a single region, country or religion or belief. The same applies to the effects of terrorism, and armed conflict. In today's interconnected world – a reality that has been emphasized due to the current COVID-19 pandemic – ideas and information flow freely, including violent extremist ideologies that can be conducive to terrorism and that have been exploited by terrorist organizations in the context of armed conflict to target – amongst others – religious and ethnic minorities.

Mexico is a firm believer in the importance of prevention by addressing the underlying issues that drive individuals towards violence, including by promoting community resilience to extremist messages that target social, political and economic grievances. Likewise, we believe that there are many lessons to be learned from conflict prevention and consolidation, in particular those efforts to promote inclusion, interfaith dialogue, cooperation for development and, crucially, the respect for human rights for all as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

All over fragile contexts around the world, religious and community leaders need to be fully engaged to address drivers of violence and conflict, as well as to promote social inclusion. It is relevant to recognize their work on the ground and their contribution in decision-making processes. Likewise, we must also recognize and take advantage of the contributions of secular organizations and community leaders that also work to promote intercultural dialogue aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism that can be conducive to terrorism and preventing armed conflict.

In these efforts we must also be clear on the importance of respecting the freedom of religion or belief by everyone, including agnostic communities, atheists and former believers, otherwise known as freedom from religion. We are extremely concerned about the effects that blasphemy and apostasy laws and decrees may have over freedom of speech, including openly debating and discussing aspects of faith or belief and we reject any false dichotomy that leads to restrictions on human rights and freedoms as a justification for order and harmony. Likewise, gender equality should not become an afterthought but a principle in any process of conflict resolution, including by dispelling gender roles and stereotypes. Freedom of religion or belief should not come at the cost of other fundamental human rights, including women rights.

Mexico wishes to recognize the valuable work carried out by the United Nations Alliance for Civilizations and its initiatives around the world, aimed at deconstructing stereotypes and hate speech, including through the implementation of the “Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic”, an initiative co-led by UNAOC, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

As we uphold the principles of freedom of belief, we welcome the international community's consensus as expressed through the Human Rights Council and General Assembly resolutions adopted on a yearly basis which represent the best expression of our shared concerns.

Thank you.

## **V. Concluding remarks**

### **United Kingdom**

#### **Remarks by H.E. Barbara Woodward, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations**

Thank you to all the briefers for their insights. We began the meeting by hearing about the positive role that religious actors can play in conflict resolution. The Archbishop of Canterbury and Professor Azza Karam told us of the value of religious actors stepping in to peace processes, as negotiators, mediators and conciliators.

On the other side of this issue, we heard how religious persecution in armed conflict has become all too commonplace. The immense personal costs from such violence were clear in Ekhlas Khudur Bajoo's moving testimony. We cannot allow impunity for these crimes. In that regard, I am thankful for Karim Khan's work, including through the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD), to hold Daesh to account. It is evident that religious persecution in conflict presents clear risks to international peace and security.

We brought this matter here today, in recognition of the need to protect members of religious and belief groups in conflict, and to highlight the important contribution they can make to progressing peace.

So we will seek a Security Council resolution on this issue. As the harrowing kidnapping in the Middle East of Archbishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church reminds us still to this day, we must – as Lord Ahmad made clear today – act against religious persecution. Innocent victims in the Middle East cannot wait.

## **VI. Written statements by other States Members of the United Nations and by observer States**

### **Turkey**

#### **Statement by Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations**

Mr. President,

Thank you for organizing this “Arria” formula meeting on religion, belief and conflict with a particular focus on the Middle East. We also thank the briefers for their presentations.

The incidences of violence against religious and belief groups, notably by terrorist organizations pose a clear threat to regional as well as international peace and security. We welcome the attention devoted by the Security Council to this issue, which needs to be considered from both conflict prevention and resolution perspectives.

Mr. President,

The abhorrent abuse of religion or belief to advance political objectives has marked ongoing conflicts in profound ways. Members of minority religious and belief groups are particularly exposed to violence during conflicts with tragic consequences. We condemn all acts of violence against any individual or group on the basis of their

conviction. At the same time, there can be no justification of carrying out atrocities in the name of any religion or belief.

In Iraq and Syria, DAESH has perpetrated indiscriminate atrocities against Muslims, Christians and Yazidis, forcing millions to flee their homes. While several Security Council resolutions recognized these atrocities, one of the safe havens for minority groups, including Yazidis who fled the savagery of DAESH was Turkey, where they were provided with shelter and humanitarian assistance.

Although the territorial defeat of DAESH was officially announced in Iraq at the end of 2017, the suffering of local populations has not come to an end. As a striking example, the defeat of DAESH has been misused by the PKK to infiltrate into Sinjar and allowed this terrorist organization's attempts to extend its influence over local populations. PKK extorted the lands of Yazidis, while kidnapping and forcibly recruiting their children into its ranks. Yazidis have since been deploring the inhumane crimes of the PKK. Nadia Murad, a well-known Yazidi activist and 2018 Nobel Peace laureate, has also drawn the attention of the world to PKK's crimes against Yazidis in Sinjar.

Due to the lack of implementation of the Sinjar Agreement, PKK continues to pose a serious threat to Yazidis in Sinjar, resulting in their ongoing displacement. Once the PKK is uprooted from the region in line with the Sinjar Agreement, displaced Yazidis would be able to safely return to their ancestral lands. The full implementation of the Sinjar Agreement is not just vital for Yazidis to return to Sinjar but also to reinstate security and stability in the wider region.

Mr. President,

In Syria, sectarian persecution and violence continue to be rampant particularly in areas under regime control.

Almost 420.000 Syrians were able to return to their homes in areas under the control of the legitimate opposition, which have been cleared from terrorists, thanks to the stabilization efforts undertaken in collaboration with the Syria Interim Government. In these stabilization efforts and in assistance programmes provided by Turkey, the principle of non-discrimination has been strictly applied and Yazidi communities have been prioritized among vulnerable groups. This is the case in terms of socioeconomic benefits, representation in local governance structures and free exercise of religion in a safe and stable environment.

We will continue to do our utmost to support all religious groups in their struggle to live freely in their ancestral homeland. The international community should learn lessons from their ongoing suffering and take action to prevent similar disasters from happening in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Mr. President,

In Syria and Iraq, terrorist organization PKK/YPG has long been employing the tactic of recruiting young girls and boys forcefully, in violation of international law. An important part of them are also from minority groups such as Arameans, as also indicated by the World Council of Arameans on several occasions.

Human rights organizations depict in detail abuses and violations of PKK/YPG against minority groups in northeast Syria. The terrorist organization digs tunnels and builds bunkers to store supplies for its attacks, infiltrate Turkey, continue to target the local population with its well-known tactics, such as blocking humanitarian aid and usurping children's right to education. It is high time for the international community to denounce these crimes and realize that there are no "good terrorists".

Mr. President,



One of the underlying features of the growing complexity and unpredictability in today's world is the changing nature of the global conflict landscape. Increasing regionalization and internationalization of conflicts, fragmentation of conflict parties and proliferation of mediation actors complicate the efforts for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The pandemic has further complicated conflict dynamics and added another one on top of multiple layers of stress factors. Fragile states and conflict regions are faced with unique challenges such as governance failures, economic hardships, growing inequalities as well as the unfolding tragedy of vulnerable groups like IDPs, refugees, and migrants. These challenges are either caused or abused by terrorist organizations and extremist groups.

Under these circumstances, there is certainly a growing need for preventive diplomacy and effective mediation. Since 2010, the UN Group of Friends of Mediation has done a commendable job to promote awareness on the importance of mediation in peaceful resolution of conflicts. The group has been instrumental for the adoption of four General Assembly resolutions on mediation and preparation of the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation. Turkey will continue to actively support mediation efforts at the UN as well as other regional organizations.

While emphasizing the importance of effective mediation, we cannot underestimate the significance of having a deep understanding of local contexts to make a difference on the ground for sustainable peace and reconciliation. The acknowledgment that religious or belief groups may not be homogenous and may face different forms of discrimination is an important aspect of understanding the local contexts and elaborating adequate tools to address the existing challenges.

In certain situations, religious leaders can play a role to de-escalate conflict, convince conflict parties to negotiate and reconcile divided communities. While not a panacea in itself, this role can be elaborated as a complementary contribution in the broader context of mediation efforts.

Mr. President,

In essence, all religions teach respect for life. Terrorism, which uses violence as a method and hatred as an ideology, is the antithesis of all religious and belief systems. We call on member states to unequivocally condemn all heinous crimes committed by terrorist groups, including those committed against religious groups and take the necessary action to prevent their reoccurrence.

Thank you.

## **Switzerland**

### **Statement by H.E. Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations**

Mister President,

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's Arria meeting and thank the United Kingdom for convening this discussion.

Switzerland attaches great importance to the protection against persecution of religious groups or communities of belief, as well as other ostracized social groups – in general, and especially in contexts of armed conflict. Such persecution is not only an attack on human dignity of the individual, but also a threat to international peace and security. Indeed, violence committed in the context of political tensions or armed

conflicts against communities is remembered and can lead to new violence, thus prolonging cycles of conflict.

In its peacebuilding work, Switzerland observes that political exclusion leads either to passivity or to violence, both of which are detrimental to sustainable peace and security. The political participation of religious or belief communities in a non-discriminatory manner is therefore a necessary condition for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and for sustaining peace.

As an example, Switzerland has worked together with Tunisia to support the development of an inclusive political dialogue in the country. After a period of authoritarian rule, Tunisia showed how to integrate previously excluded, ostracized and persecuted groups of opinion and belief into the process of political participation and citizenship.

The Security Council should encourage, where appropriate, a similar approach in the specific contexts brought to its attention. In recent decades, many communities of belief or of opinion have been excluded from political participation in many parts of the world, whether in Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, the Sahel, or East Africa. Such exclusions are regularly made in the name of the fight against terrorism in order to keep out political opponents. This only worsens the security situation and the chances of resolving conflicts peacefully: the United Nations experiences this daily in its mediation efforts.

Therefore, in order to work towards the prevention and resolution of violent political conflicts, the Security Council should on the one hand take into account the protection of religious groups and communities of belief against persecution. On the other hand, Switzerland encourages the Council to protect them from political exclusion and to encourage their political and civic participation – even if their ideas differ from those of the majority.

Thank you.

## **Slovakia**

### **Statement by H. E. Mr. Michal Mlynár, Permanent Representative of Slovakia to the United Nations**

We thank the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom for convening this important meeting on advancing the protection of members of religious and belief groups in conflict, and the role of religious actors in conflict resolution.

Slovakia is an authentic supporter of the religious freedom agenda and we are an active member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Alongside supporting the idea of the EU Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief's continuation, we pledged to establish position of our national Plenipotentiary for Religious Freedom or Belief within the Office of the Slovak Government.

There is no doubt that conflicts are often driven on religious grounds, but we can turn it around as well. Religion can help with preventing or ending an ongoing conflict or take its part in sustaining peace. It can reach remote or hard-to-access areas, interchange with other religions through interfaith dialogues, or simply do its part through education. Both religious and non-religious education can and must lead to tolerance, non-violence and mutual respect within as well as between religions, and it is upon all religious actors to share peaceful doctrines of their traditions.

It is of our view, that religion can contribute significantly to peacebuilding efforts, and religious leaders shall have their seat at the negotiating table. For they are

the ones that bear strong power within their communities and can help with success and sustainability of a peace agreement. There are numerous examples in this regard from Africa, Middle East or even Europe where religious groups effectively contributed to peacebuilding or played a key mediating role.

To promote the role of religion and of its actors in peace and security agenda, the Security Council should systematically address and include religion in matters of conflict resolution and prevention, share best practices and invite religious actors to present their track records in peace processes.

Slovakia remains committed to and actively engaged on freedom of religion and belief within various multilateral platforms. Freedom of religion and belief is among our top priorities, not only as a moral value, but also as a strategic one.

## **Brazil**

### **Statement by the delegation of the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations**

Brazil is grateful to the United Kingdom for convening this timely and extremely important discussion. Brazil's commitment to the defence of freedom of religion or belief is expressed both multilaterally, by its engagement with initiatives such as the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, but also by directly aiding affected communities – last December, for example, the Brazilian Government made a contribution to UNHCR towards projects related to religious freedom in Syria. Brazil will also host the IV Ministerial do Advance Religious Freedom or Belief, as well as the II Ministerial of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), to be held in Brasilia, on 19 November 2021.

The linkages between religion, belief and conflict are as old as conflict itself, but have been broached only sporadically and unsystematically by the Security Council. A deeper, more focused examination of this topic by the council is in order, and has been given a promising start by initiatives such as today's debate and the Arria format meeting organized by Poland on August 22nd 2019, which also marked the first International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

As has been pointed out, religion or belief can be a factor in the outbreak or exacerbation of conflict, and it can also play a role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The Council must, however, avoid the pitfall of unduly securitizing the debate around freedom of religion or belief. While it is clear that an increasing number of conflicts currently on the Council's agenda has a relevant religion or belief aspect, most violations of this right are not conflict-related, and we must be cautious towards any automatic association between these issues, which would constitute a counterproductive blurring of concepts and mandates.

In order to avoid these risks while fully exploring the opportunities presented by the Council's new engagement with religion and belief, we must recall that this is not a new topic in the UN System as a whole. The Human Rights Council, the General Assembly's Third Committee, the Alliance of Civilizations, the Special Adviser of the Prevention of Genocide and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief all have ample experience that can be mobilized in the Council's approach to this subject. The Secretary-General's envoys and representatives to conflict-affected countries may also have valuable experience engaging with religious actors on the ground, and should be consulted. Building on our collective knowledge will avoid the duplication of work and allow for a more realistic and evidence-driven debate. Additionally, the unnecessary securitization of the broader discussion on freedom of

religion or belief can also be avoided by focusing on concrete issues in which the Council can make an observable difference.

In the Middle East, the connections between religion, belief and conflict are clear, from Daesh's genocidal attacks on Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims to the instrumentalization of religious divisions by parties to the conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Libya. These conflicts remind us that religious persecution can be both the final goal of armed groups or governments and an instrument of war, depriving the victims of their sense of community and their spiritual and cultural heritage. Protective measures aimed at specific vulnerable groups have already been incorporated into humanitarian, peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts. Similar measures can be conceived that take into account the distinct threats faced by individuals due to their beliefs. Religious sites themselves have been the object of a complementary discussion over the last couple of years – the Secretary-General's 2019 Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites offers a wide-ranging approach to the issue, while the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance's Declaration on Safe Places of Worship, adopted last November, is an example of a more conflict-focused stance on their protection.

Religious actors – and this includes not only religious leaders and institutions, but also religious communities themselves – can be seen as relevant agents in conflict resolution. Whenever the instrumentalization of religious hatred is one of the drivers of conflict, peace will only be sustainable when the original resentment has been redressed. Religious leaders have an especially relevant role to play in promoting mutual understanding, atonement and forgiveness. The Secretary-General's 2017 Plan for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence offers a pertinent toolkit in this regard. There is an additional role that can be played by religious actors – that of brokers or mediators in conflicts that are not, in themselves, of a religious nature. Oftentimes religious actors are among the few that are respected by different parties in conflict, and their expertise and contacts can and should be mobilized in peace processes. Ideally, this positive potential should be harnessed by existing conflict resolution mechanisms, whenever warranted by any given conflict situation.

While the sensitivity of the issues concerned recommends caution and conceptual clarity, Brazil believes there is space for productive and innovative work regarding religion, belief and conflict in the UNSC's work. It is essential to keep in mind the functions and powers of the UNSC so as to not overlap with other multilateral efforts, but also to build upon them, recognizing the Council's relatively late arrival to discussions on this topic. To explore this avenue of action responsibly should be a goal of the UNSC, duty-bound as it is to follow every possible path to peace.

## **Belgium**

[Original: French]

### **Statement by the delegation of the Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations**

Mr. Chair,

Belgium thanks the United Kingdom for organizing this exchange and the panellists for their participation.

Several conflicts that are regularly on the agenda of the Security Council involve violence based on religion or belief.

For Belgium, freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including the right not to believe, is a fundamental right. Belgium has a very solid and broad legislative framework to combat acts of discrimination and incitement to hatred on the basis of religious or philosophical beliefs. We can do more to protect this fundamental right, including in situations of armed conflict. Belgium is in favour of strengthening existing mechanisms for early warning and preventive action related to violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. The special procedures of the Human Rights Council, in particular the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, play an essential role in providing early warning of potential violations by both State and non-State actors. A joint statement issued in February 2021 by a group of independent United Nations human rights experts provides a pertinent reminder of the human rights responsibilities of armed non-State actors.

Civil society and religious leaders can play a key role not only in conflict prevention and the reconciliation of societies but also in conflict resolution. The positive role of religious actors is highlighted in the Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, which was developed with financial support from Belgium. A central practice – adopted in Belgium – is interreligious dialogue. Although each context is different, such dialogue should aspire to be comprehensive and inclusive, as well as gender-sensitive.

In conflict situations, interreligious dialogue can lay the groundwork for advances such as humanitarian access to conflict areas. It has in the past led to joint appeals by religious leaders to support peace efforts, including those of the United Nations. We hope that the positive results achieved will encourage other religious actors to follow suit.

Belgium would like to commend the work and dedication of religious actors, the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the entire United Nations system and their partners.

## **Poland**

### **Statement by the delegation of the Permanent Mission of Poland to the United Nations**

Poland would like to thank the UK delegation for organizing this timely debate on the extremely relevant and important issue of protecting members of religious and belief groups in the conflict situation, and the special role of religious actors in this context.

Unfortunately, the number of persons suffering from religious persecution is growing, and the current COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbates this tragic phenomenon. The Middle East has particularly suffered from violence and intolerance based on religion or belief, but discrimination and harassments concern persons of all religions and faiths across the world.

Therefore we, as the international community, have moral obligation to protect civilians, including persons belonging to religious and belief groups in conflict situations, and to hold accountable all those responsible for any violations, according to the international law. United Nations, as the most global organization, bears this responsibility the most and has the major potential to monitor and address emerging conflicts and crises in which individuals are targeted because of their religion or lack of thereof.

One example of the global initiative within the UN was Poland-led GA resolution 73/296, establishing International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. The resolution honours all victims of religious persecutions who too often remain forgotten and left behind. In our view this Day seeks to raise awareness about the importance of respect for religious diversity and inclusion. It aims to help create an inclusive platform for Member States, relevant international organizations, civil society, private sector as well as faith-based organizations, to engage in events to commemorate victims and assist survivors.

Furthermore, the power of religion and of religious leaders cannot be underestimated, but instead should be considered as efficient tools that can be used to unite divided societies and foster non-violent relations between various actors in international politics.

In recent times, we have witnessed many instances where leaders would exploit religion to incite violence and spoil peace processes. This only further testifies to the pervasive power of religion which, through proper education and training, could be channelled towards peaceful conflict resolution through dispute settlement and building resilience capacities against violent extremism and polarization.

Particularly useful in conflict prevention and peacebuilding may be local faith-based organizations, which possess an in-depth knowledge of indigenous peoples and their communities. They often enjoy general respect and moral authority which can play a crucial role in peace processes when it comes to mediating between the feuding parties and pushing for conflict resolution. It is also important to support moderate religious leaders, especially in conflict settings where fundamentalist tendencies tend to occur creating a breeding ground for the so-called religious terrorism and ritual violence.

As expressed in the “Joint statement on religious actors’ contribution to the peacebuilding” co-signed by 18 countries participating in last year’s Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in Warsaw – The religious leaders and institutions, being deeply rooted in and serving as important moral authorities in their communities, promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and being key contributors in building trust between and among social groups, might act as additional and genuine mediators along with traditional or political actors in de-escalating violence and the process of conflict resolution.

The timely debate we are having now within the Security Council proves that these words remain relevant now more than ever.

## **Azerbaijan**

### **Statement by the delegation of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Nations**

We thank the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations for holding Arria-Formula meeting on “Religion, Belief and Conflict: the protection of members of religious and belief groups in conflict and religious actors in conflict resolution.”

This meeting offers a timely opportunity to shed further light on violence against religious communities and persecution based on religion or belief at this juncture when many regions continue to be affected by armed conflict, paving the way for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

Threats to international security, as well as the spread of violent extremism emphasize the need for soft measures tackling the structural contexts from which they emerge. We must fight these scourges in all their forms and manifestations with determination and in full solidarity.

Targeting places of worship with the purpose of intimidating or terrorizing communities increases religious confrontation and results in more violence between different religious groups. Therefore, preventive measures are highly important and need to be adopted to minimize those risks. In this regard, Azerbaijan fully supports the UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites.

The Security Council has a critical role to play in addressing such threats by ensuring the implementation of its relevant resolutions.

The promotion of mutual understanding, tolerance and dialogue among different faiths is one of the most effective preventive mechanisms against radicalization. It is critical to ensure that religious identity does not become a source of division or prejudices. It is our common responsibility to build communities that embrace inclusion and advance diversity.

Peace breeding cultural values have flourished in Azerbaijan for centuries, which has been home to people of different ethnic backgrounds and religions. My country has a solid track record in advancing intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence between ethnic and religious communities. We have successfully incorporated multiculturalism into State policy. Since its launch in 2008, the “Baku Process”, has become a key global platform for dialogue between people of different backgrounds. Starting from 2011, the “World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue”, co-sponsored by UNAOC, UNESCO, World Tourism Organization, the Council of Europe and ISESCO, has been organized biennially in Baku. The Secretary-General has qualified this endeavour as a “key global platform for cross-cultural dialogue.”

The COVID-19 has led to an increase in hate speech, division and crimes motivated by bias. Now more than ever there is a pressing need for greater international cooperation, unity and solidarity.

It is essential to promote knowledge of cultural and religious property protection. In this context, Azerbaijan has sponsored UNESCO’s “Protection of Cultural Property: Military Manual” (2016), which serves as a timely response to the growing need for military forces to take better account of the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict.

During nearly 30 years of the occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan by Armenia, Azerbaijani historical and cultural heritage has been consistently and deliberately eradicated. Thousands of historical monuments, mosques, museums and cemeteries have been destroyed and plundered.

The scale of destruction, vandalism, plunder and looting evidenced after the liberation of the territories of Azerbaijan is shocking and unprecedented. Except for the areas inhabited by Armenian illegal settlers, most parts of the occupied territories have literally been turned into a ghost land, as all the civilian infrastructure and private houses, as well as cultural and religious sites, that existed there before the occupation were razed to the ground. Out of 67 mosques and Islamic religious shrines in those territories, 64 have been destroyed or significantly damaged and desecrated. Defiled by Armenian graffiti, the mosques in the Aghdam, Gubadly and Zangilan districts were used as pigsties and cowsheds.

Following the trilateral statement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation and Armenia on 10 November 2020, Azerbaijan embarked on a

large-scale plan for rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration of all its conflict-affected territories.

The preservation and restoration of cultural and religious heritage have been given top priority. The State Service of Cultural Heritage Conservation, Development and Rehabilitation under the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan has already started work on restoration of historical and cultural monuments, religious sites and museums, as well as the development of new cultural infrastructure. The State Service has plans to open a website with information, pictures and maps of cultural and religious sites located in the liberated territories.

Azerbaijan is committed to open and inclusive dialogue, and it is in this spirit that people of different faiths and backgrounds in my country enjoy the same rights and opportunities.

## Holy See

### **Statement by H.E. Archbishop Gabriele Caccia Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See**

The Holy See thanks the United Kingdom for hosting this important Arria-Formula Meeting. The need to protect those who are persecuted, detained or killed for their religious belief allows us to consider the gravity of these heinous acts and the dangerous ideologies that drive those who commit them, as well as the extraordinary impactful role that believers, faith leaders and religious and communities play in advancing peace.

Returning from his recent Apostolic Journey to Iraq, Pope Francis told journalists that reading Nadia Murad's book, "The Last Girl" was one of the reasons he was inspired to visit Iraq. Indeed, in Iraq, Pope Francis made specific mention of "the Yazidi community, which has mourned the deaths of many men and witnessed thousands of women, girls and children kidnapped, sold as slaves, subjected to physical violence and forced conversions". In addition, he underscored that "when terrorism invaded the north [of Iraq], it wantonly destroyed part of its magnificent religious heritage, including the churches, monasteries and places of worship of various communities." Indeed, where there is conflict, members of religious communities are often left insecure, and their places of worship are specifically targeted. It has become a hallmark of ethnic cleansing and genocidal acts not only to attack a community's religion, but to deface or even destroy its religious sites. Such heinous crimes, which seek to erase both the historical memory and living presence of these foundational communities, are to be condemned and must stop. Authorities must protect their citizens and the communities to which they belong, without distinction. The international community likewise plays an important role. Recalling his moving visits to Iraq's destroyed churches, Pope Francis asked a pertinent if inconvenient question: "Who sells the weapons to the destroyers? They do not make weapons at home."

There are some, meanwhile, who, instead of considering how religion brings people together, seek rather to lay the blame for violence and other social ills at their door, as if religion is the cause of division and even bloodshed. We must not confuse the violent extremist ideologies of those who claim to be religious but who act with "the purpose of achieving objectives that are political, economic, worldly and short-sighted," with the countless men and women, who throughout the ages, have, in accordance with the tenets of their faith or religious beliefs sought to make a positive change within society. As Pope Francis said in Abraham's birthplace, "Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals



of religion. We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion; indeed, we are called unambiguously to dispel all misunderstandings.”

Rather than give way to accepting or propagating negative portrayals of religion, we must uncover the many positive examples of healing, reconciliation and conflict resolution which people of faith have given. One such example is certainly “the young Muslim volunteers of Mosul, who helped to repair churches and monasteries, building fraternal friendships on the rubble of hatred, and those Christians and Muslims who today are restoring mosques and churches together”, along with the powerful examples of forgiveness such as that of Mrs. Doha Sabah Abdallah who gave her testimony in Qaraqosh whose son was killed by a mortar shell. Another is the platform of religious leaders in the Central African Republic, where leaders of different confessions have come together, united by their quest for reconciliation and lasting peace for their country and its population. There are many other examples, from Colombia to South Sudan, and more recently in Myanmar, where people of faith and conviction, have shown that there is another way, one that does not involve recourse to “the instruments of death” but purposefully chooses to broker peace through dialogue.

It is appropriate for the international community, and particularly those responsible for peace and security, such as the United Nations Security Council, to listen to these authentic religious actors and to learn from their very real, lived experience on the ground, and to build upon it. As critical stakeholders, religious actors should have a meaningful seat at the table, participating in the many meetings and programmes currently being convened and promoted by the international community. Their experiences are an essential contribution at the legislative, security and administrative level, both nationally and internationally.

This is the opportunity before us: to engage and support religious actors – be they religious leaders, faith-based organizations or individuals driven by their faith to do good in and for their communities – and to help advance peace and human fraternity, allowing them to lead us by example. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is in the best interest of the international community to recognize religious actors as a valuable resource and to promote the invaluable contacts that religious groups and faith-based organizations have, especially in less connected places. At the same time, leaders cannot turn a blind eye to suffering that believers and faith communities currently endure. This includes urgent and necessary efforts, at both national and international levels, to ensure in word and deed the full respect for the universally recognized freedom of religion or belief.

Since today’s meeting is examining, among other topics, the situation in the Middle East, it seems appropriate to recall the words the Pope addressed to the diplomatic corps, just last month, about the importance of ensuring “a pluralistic, tolerant and diversified Middle East in which the Christian community can make its proper contribution and not be reduced to a minority in need of protection.” As the Security Council has been told before, the desire of so many Christians is only to help their countries in the Middle East, to rebuild and construct their common future rather than to leave it behind. Such an opportunity should not be taken away from any citizen.

In our efforts to achieve a safer, more just and secure world, it is of crucial importance to recognize, appreciate and catalyse the positive contribution of religion and members of religious communities to peace and development in our societies today.

## Malta

### Statement by H.E. Ambassador Vanessa Frazier, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Malta to the United Nations

Your Excellency,

Malta thanks the United Kingdom for organizing today's Arria-Formula meeting. We also thank the briefers for their insightful comments on these pertinent issues.

The ability of a person to practice a religion or belief, including in conflict contexts, is a sacrosanct human right, affirmed and protected in international treaties and political declarations.

It is a matter of deep concern that this right continues to be contested with people being targeted on the basis of their beliefs, in situations of conflict occurring mostly, though not exclusively, in the MENA region. It is the responsibility of the international community to pre-empt such violence and protect such victims.

This can be achieved through a number of avenues. Firstly, and as a guiding principle, we must ensure that regardless of circumstances, no person seeks to fracture a society along religious lines. Secondly, we must ensure the rule of law is upheld in every situation: religious freedoms, and the right to be free from persecution on the basis of one's religion or belief, rely on the same institutions as other human rights for support and protection. Thirdly, and most fundamentally, we must work towards fostering societies where mutual respect for all peoples, regardless of their faith or belief, is a common sentiment. This will require collective efforts aimed towards enhancing education as well as inter-faith dialogue, and provides an opportunity for religious leaders to contribute.

In the context of ongoing conflict, we must avoid situations where hostilities provide a backdrop for religious persecution. It is crucial for all parties to abide by all provisions of international humanitarian law, which explicitly bestow protection for one to practice their religious convictions.

In the deplorable circumstances where religious-based persecution does take place, it is important that those responsible are held accountable, including through international judicial mechanisms where appropriate given the severity of such crimes. Justice must be delivered to the victims.

Attention must also be drawn to the contributions religious actors can make at a variety of points along the conflict cycle. Religious leaders, given their influential role and spiritual leadership both over their religious communities and broader societies, have the capability of mobilizing support for peace, and of condemning any acts of violence perpetrated by those who falsely claim to be acting in the name of any religion. This act of leadership also extends to acts of gender-based violence that are falsely claimed to be carried out for religious purposes.

The UN system has a clear role to play in seeking to prevent such persecution and to promoting the role of religious actors in the field of conflict resolution. Malta will articulate two broad points in this regard. Firstly, the international community must remain cognizant and sensitized to the pernicious ability of religious intolerance to breed conflict. To this effect, efforts to integrate language on preventing such religious-based violence – including through educational and literacy-driven programmes – should be integrated into relevant agendas. Secondly, the Security Council should consider exploring any possible synergies between the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, given the Office's early warning capacities.

In conclusion, Malta would like to highlight that it would be in our collective interest to build peaceful, inclusive and justice societies based on the respect for, and promotion of, international human rights as well as humanitarian principles.

I thank you.

## **Qatar**

### **Statement by H.E. Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations**

Mr. Chair,

I would like, at the outset, to thank the Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom for organizing this high-level Arria-formula meeting.

This meeting is relevant and timely as advancing the protection of members of religious groups in conflict is an urgent imperative and a moral obligation on the entire international community.

Religious groups are too often the subject of violence and atrocities in conflicts, including being targeted by terrorist groups, which the State of Qatar has consistently condemned wherever, whenever and by whomsoever committed. In addition, the State of Qatar has consistently called for accountability for the most egregious crimes under international law, which often include crimes committed against religious groups and minorities.

In order for peace and reconciliation processes to be successful and sustainable, they need to address the roots of conflicts and be inclusive of all segments of society, including religious groups. Therefore, the full, equal and meaningful participation of religious leaders in peace processes, along with civil society, academics, and women and youth is crucial.

Proceeding from this recognition, the State of Qatar, as an active supporter of the peaceful settlement of conflict through mediation and dialogue, has taken steps to ensure the participation of religious leaders in peace processes and negotiations it facilitates. The ongoing Afghan Peace Talks in Doha have included civil and religious representatives of the Afghan parties.

Mr. Chair,

The responsibility of religious leaders precedes the eruption of violence, and they can – and should – play a role in preventing conflict by promoting a culture of peace and religious tolerance. The State of Qatar attaches great importance to prevention and addressing the root causes for conflict and has, therefore, strived to promote religious tolerance through educational and cultural initiatives. The State of Qatar has been a leading hub for inter-religious dialogue and hosts annually the Doha Interfaith Dialogue Conference, in which religious and faith leaders of all denominations participate. The State of Qatar is a member of groups and initiatives promoting the culture of peace and tolerance, such as the Group of Friends of Education for Global Citizenship, and has been a leading supporter of the UN Alliance of Civilization since its inception.

Given the increasing threats that religious sites are subject to, and the need to provide protection for them, the State of Qatar is funding the UN Office of Counterterrorism Global Programme on Countering Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets, which aims to prevent and counter attacks against targets that include religious sites.

Mr. Chair,

Finally, it is appropriate to emphasize the role of the Security Council in this regard. The Council has included religious factors in its consideration of conflicts. By explicitly highlighting in its outcomes the role of religious leaders the Council can contribute positively to driving more participation by and encouraging more recognition of their role in prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Thank you.

## **Armenia**

### **Statement of H.E. Mr. Mher Margaryan, Permanent Representative of Armenia to the United Nations**

Mr. President,

We thank the United Kingdom for convening the Arria Formula meeting on such a relevant topic of protection of members of religious groups in conflict and religious actors in conflict resolution and recognize the Most Reverend and Rt. Hon. Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, Special Adviser Karim Khan QC, Professor Azza Karam and member of the Yazidi community Ms. Ekhlal Bajoo for bringing their valuable contribution to the discussions.

Historically, protection of religious groups has played an important role in shaping the international system of human rights. In the 19th and beginning of 20th century the joint efforts of European Great Powers to protect Christians from mass atrocities shaped the concept of human rights as a matter of legitimate concern for all states.

The genocidal acts perpetrated against Christians, Yazidis and other communities by terrorist organizations committed in Syria and Iraq are stark reminders that denial of the crime and dehumanization of victims do not merely belong to history. We continue to witness instances whereby entire communities are subject to violence and persecution for the mere fact of belonging to a particular religious group, attempts to introduce religious dimension to the armed conflicts, abuse of religion to promote identity-based hate crimes and atrocities.

Yazidi people in Iraq were one of the victims of religious violence and genocidal persecution in Middle East. In 2018, the National Assembly of Armenia adopted a Statement on the recognition and condemnation of the Genocide of Yazidis by the terrorist organizations, calling for investigation and accountability for the committed crimes, ensure security and protection of the Yazidi people and take all necessary measures to prevent human rights violations. Historically, our country has been a homeland for the Yazidi people, and, in 2019, the largest Yazidi temple in the world opened its doors in Armenia, which also symbolizes the centuries-old interfaith and intercultural harmony and coexistence between the Armenian and Yazidi peoples.

The violence and atrocities did not bypass Syrian Armenians, many of whom, including religious leaders lost their lives in terrorist attacks by ISIL, Al Nusra Front and their affiliates. The Armenian religious and cultural heritage in Kessab, Deyr Zor, Aleppo was desecrated and vandalized. The Saint Martyrs Armenian Church in the city of Deyr Zor, which was a sanctuary for the remains of many victims of the Armenian Genocide was destroyed by ISIL and Al Nusra Front and their affiliates.

Mr. President,

Our own region has not been immune from violence and hate crimes on religious grounds in conflict situations. The aggressive war unleashed by Azerbaijan against

the people of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in the midst of an unprecedented global crisis, was marked by massive loss of human lives, deliberate destruction, vandalism and desecration of the Armenian religious and cultural sites aimed at erasing millennia-old civilizational presence of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. The foreign terrorist fighters and mercenaries recruited and transferred from the Middle East to Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, were involved in committing hate crimes on religious and ethnic grounds and destruction of the Armenian religious monuments.

Azerbaijan's systematic denial and destruction of the Armenian historical and religious heritage in the region is a long-standing state policy, notable examples of which are the targeted destruction of Armenian cathedrals in Shushi, including the Holy Saviour Ghazanchetsots Cathedral and the Armenian Church of St. John the Baptist in Shushi.

Even after establishing ceasefire Azerbaijan has continued destruction and desecration of Armenian churches, shrines, cross-stones and other religious monuments. Refusal of Azerbaijani authorities to cooperate in the area of cultural preservation, by way of denying access to the independent fact-finding mission of UNESCO to conduct an inventory of the vast cultural and religious heritage of the region, is a clear warning sign of the intent to destroy the Armenian Christian heritage in the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh currently under Azerbaijan's military control.

Glorification of hate crimes against religious groups by political leaders creates a fertile ground for discrimination and marginalization, which, if not addressed, may lead to mass atrocities. Attempts to deny or to justify atrocious crimes undermine the fight against impunity for the identity-based crimes. The religious leaders bear an important role in promoting tolerance, dialogue and peaceful coexistence and raising their voice against targeting of religious heritage.

Thank you.

## **Bahrain**

### **Statement by H.E. Mr. Jamal Fares Alrowaiei, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bahrain.**

At the outset, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the delegation of the United Kingdom for hosting today's meeting on "Religion, Belief, and Conflict: the protections of members of religious and belief groups in conflict and religious actors in conflict resolution". This event is timely as the religious harmony and co-existence that has characterized the Middle East for hundreds of years is under serious threat from zealous groups that seek to spread a message of hate and glorify conflict.

Mr. Chair,

While religion has been one of the foremost important forces of good, it has unfortunately been misinterpreted and misused not only to spread hate and incitement against other groups but also to justify atrocities, thereby aggravating existing conflicts or in certain cases instigating them. Indeed, a confluence of extremist ideology and ignorance have led to the rise of this phenomenon.

In the words of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of Bahrain: "Ignorance is the Enemy of Peace, it is, therefore, our duty to learn, to share, and to live together, by the Tenets of Faith in the spirit of mutual respect and love."

In this spirit, the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration, which was officially launched in September 2017, emphasizes five pillars: the freedom to express religious faith, the freedom of the religious choice, the rejection of invoking God's name to legitimize any form of violence, respect of religious rights and responsibilities, and spreading the hope of faith.

Mr. Chair,

We believe that religious leaders can play a significant role in preventing atrocities committed in the name of religion by combatting the spread of extremism and returning people of different faiths and to mutual respect between people of different faiths. We need to support religious education and training that emphasizes the importance of respecting and celebrating diversity.

In this regard, the King Hamad Global centre for Peaceful Coexistence actively hosts and facilitates conferences, dialogues, and symposia where leaders of different religions and faiths meet to discuss how to further promote a culture of peace and coexistence. Moreover, under the patronage of His Majesty the King of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the King Hamad Chair in the Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence was inaugurated in Sapienza University in Rome in 2018 with the aim of instilling the values of a culture of peace in young people around the world. Such efforts are a means to combat extremism and radicalization conducive to terrorism.

In conclusion, we reaffirm Bahrain's commitment to promoting the noble values of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence to foster a culture of peace and mutual respect, in which cooperation and common interests support further stability, security and prosperity.

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