

Tehran Conference on Religion in the Modern World

Tehran, 12-14 October 2008

Final Declaration

At a time when global food, energy and financial crises and violence by state and non-state actors in new and protracted conflicts, particularly the conflicts in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan,¹ threaten to exacerbate divisions in and between societies, eminent political and religious leaders, meeting in Tehran, called for urgent action in response to expectations across the world for new vision and leadership. They identified initiatives for the management of diversity and dialogue among and within cultures and religions to reduce tensions. They committed themselves to work together to realize a way forward based on cooperation and a response to the material and spiritual needs of the people.

The leaders were very conscious that the array of problems facing the world has become increasingly acute and the current global financial crisis is only the latest development that challenges many of the assumptions of the dominant world view today. The exercise of power has too often given rise to concerns about application of double standards, rather than justice, fairness and compassion. In the absence of a moral compass, the problems will prove intractable. A reassertion of ethical values is needed to deal with the problems of inequality and poverty, climate change, denial of human dignity, rights and freedoms, weapons of mass destruction and increasing suspicions, fear, polarization and violence.

Principles

The participants at the Tehran Conference, in addition to practical measures outlined further below, have agreed that a number of common principles, which emerged during the discussions, need to be further highlighted and addressed:

- At this critical time, it is important for political and religious leaders to recognize that their common concerns and shared values are more significant than their differences, and to work together to give moral leadership at local, national and international levels;
- Sustained dialogue among and within religions and cultures, and between religious leaders and current political leaders, is a pressing requirement of our time, empowering societies and nations to recognize their common humanity and destiny, re-examine assumptions, transcend hostile images, engage in self-criticism, denounce double standards, identify shared values and interests,

¹ The nature and origins of these conflicts are sharply different.

and integrate multiple perspectives in a pluralistic, inclusive and mutually enriching environment;

- Ethical standards, based on empathy, justice, responsibility, and respect for human dignity, should form the basis for local and global governance and contribute to promoting a human-centered development model that emphasizes social justice, and economic and environmental responsibility;
- International institutions should fairly represent the current global situation. Reform of these institutions should primarily focus on the needs and aspirations of the peoples across the world. The composition of the United Nations Security Council was noted as an example of an unfair and unjust arrangement which provokes resentment;
- A culture of dialogue and peace, founded on inclusion, mutual recognition and respect, and embracing diversity as an asset and not a liability, is a key contributing factor to overcome extremism, terrorism and violence, which are often fueled by humiliation and anger caused by injustice, domination, occupation, discrimination and insulting treatment of nations;
- Religion and faith play a significant role in the public sphere. There will be no conflict between state and religion, when the state is genuinely democratic and religion is committed to human dignity and rights and a pluralistic society;
- Religious leaders, mindful of their moral authority and responsibility to take a stand, and complementing the constructive efforts of political leaders, can and should significantly heal divisions, and contribute to advancing social justice and human rights, and preventing war and violence.
- Justice and equality and other ethical principles, revered by all religious and cultural traditions, are key to peaceful interaction among individuals, groups, communities and nations. Equality should be promoted by ensuring that minorities and diverse religious and cultural groups can constructively contribute to their shared societies.
- Gender equity and justice should be promoted within the religious, social and political realms; women should be empowered to participate actively in dialogue among cultures and religions; and balanced gender perspectives should be integrated in these dialogues.

Recommendations

The leaders and participants resolved to:

- Promote urgent action on pressing global and regional issues, by articulating and affirming the relevance of the above-mentioned basic principles;

- Encourage programs of dialogue among religions and cultures, particularly at the grass roots level, effectively leading to shared projects and agenda for change;
- Utilize and encourage educational institutions and the media as important tools to promote the values of diversity, tolerance and pluralism, enhance positive and constructive communication, understanding and engagement between religious and cultural groups, and disseminate objective reporting on diversity; and prevent extremists from exploiting these means towards violent ends;
- Recognize and facilitate the central role and essential contribution of women in the public sphere, and in replacing the culture of rivalry and exclusion with empathy and understanding;
- Empower youth to participate and exercise leadership in political processes and institutions as well as in dialogue among religions, cultures and societies;
- Utilize the positive role of faith in the process of conflict resolution, reconstruction and community healing, including through encouraging inter and intra religious dialogues, and organizing mutual and constructive interaction between various religious and cultural communities.

Plan of Action

The participants agreed to take the following practical measures individually and collectively:

1. To widely disseminate these common principles, objectives and programs, through web sites, newspaper editorials; and explore publication of a periodic “Religious and Cultural Dialogue Watch Report;”
2. To compile examples of best policies and practices on dialogue and co-existence between religions and cultures;
3. To organize roundtables with current government leaders and officials with a view to sharing the vision of dialogue and understanding and its contribution in conflict prevention and resolution;
4. To establish local partnerships through networking and liaison with national civil society organizations, pursuing understanding and conciliation, particularly in conflicted regions;
5. To organize interactions between youth and religious and political leaders on these pressing global issues;
6. To engage the private sector to participate actively and contribute effectively in promoting a global culture of responsibility, empathy, mutual respect and dialogue;
7. To establish a partnership and collaborate closely with the United Nations’ Alliance of Civilization in a mutually complimentary process of advancing common objectives;
8. To actively contribute to the Program of Work of the United Nations’ Global Agenda on Dialogue among Civilizations and to submit this document along with the statements of the previous conference and workshops for circulation to United Nations membership as contribution of civil society under General Assembly Resolution A/Res/60/4;
9. To present the findings of this dialogue at the Club de Madrid’s Global Forum on Leadership for Shared Societies (Rotterdam, November 12-14); and at the meeting of the United Nations

- Alliance of Civilization (Turkey, April 2009) and take up other such opportunities and establish partnerships with like-minded organizations, including UNESCO;
10. To convene a resource group of religious and political leaders who can work with current leaders and decision-makers as they shape policies that will reduce inter-cultural and inter-religious conflicts and violence and support human rights;
 11. To establish a Joint Task Force, comprising the representatives of the sponsoring organizations, to pursue the implementation of these initiatives and actively seek innovative ways and means of furthering common goals;
 12. To continue to maintain contact and to meet periodically to assess progress and to plan ahead.

Background

The conference on “Religion in the Modern World,” convened in Tehran on 12-14 October 2008, brought together forty eminent religious and political leaders, scholars and representatives of international organizations. The conference was the fifth in a series of dialogues, beginning with a conference on “Religion, Democracy, and Extremism,” held in Oslo in May 2007, and followed over the past year by three thematic workshops on “Extremism and Tolerance,” “Politics and Religion” and “Women, Equality and Peace.”

These five meetings are part of a two-year collaborative effort between the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights (OC) and the Foundation for Dialogue among Civilizations (FDC) in collaboration with the Club de Madrid (CdM). All five events were co-chaired by former President of Iran, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (FDC), and the former Prime Minister of Norway and CdM Board member, Kjell Magne Bondevik (OC).