

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: ENRICHING FUTURE COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

On November 5, the Institute of International Relations together with the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the group of Prague-based ambassadors of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation countries and the Anna Lindh Foundation hosted the fifth annual conference on Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue, this year with the subtitle Building Future Communities. The conference sought to explore how diverse groups, as represented by the core audiences of academics, diplomats and NGOs, can react to the challenges and disruptions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and how they can engage in building stronger and richer future communities.

OPENING REMARKS

Chair: **Dr. Emil Aslan**, Institute of International Relations Prague

- **H.E. Tomáš Petříček**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
- **H.E. Sundus Albayraqdar**, Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq in the Czech Republic
- **H.E. Mons. Charles Daniel Balvo**, Apostolic Nuncio to the Czech Republic
- **Dr. Azza Karam**, Religions for Peace International

[Opening remarks - video](#)

The opening of the conference brought together representatives of the organizing institutions as well as distinguished guests involved in intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The conference was opened by H.E. Petříček, who stressed the importance of overcoming crises, which were recently represented not only by Covid-19 but also by the recent extremist attacks, while adhering to the values of legitimacy, solidarity, resilience and human rights and supporting the youth as the crucial actor of the future (read [his full speech here](#)). H.E. Petříček was followed by H.E. Sundus Albayraqdar, who celebrated the fact that people from different backgrounds came together to discuss the greater good, claiming that this is already a positive outcome of the ongoing crisis. In the second part of her speech, she read a note by Doctor Hanan Ashrawi, who claimed that “the colourful human tapestry of faith is inspirational as it shows that diversity is the base to empowerment” to attest that respect is the key for finding the way to the recovery. H.E. Mons. Charles Daniel Balvo came as the third speaker, and quoting Pope Francis II’s speeches, he stressed that to overcome the present crisis, which does not recognise any social, religious, ethnical or gender barriers, we should come together as love is equally

borderless. The final speaker, Dr. Azza Karam, concentrated in her remarks on the role of faith-based groups in humanitarian activities as well as in fighting the coronavirus crisis.

PANEL I: FAITH BASED SOCIETIES IN THE (DE)GLOBALIZED WORLD

Chair: **Dr. Zora Hesová**, Charles University in Prague

- **Prof. Gilles Kepel**, Université Paris Sciences et Lettres
- **Dr. Walter Homolka**, University of Potsdam
- **H.E. Hussam Zomlot**, Ambassador, Palestinian Mission to the United Kingdom

[Panel I - video](#)

The first panel of the conference focused on various religious communities' responses to the covid-19 crisis in areas as diverse as Middle Eastern geopolitics, local practices of religious organizations and, in some cases, intersections of both. The speakers tackled the following questions in particular: What have various political leaders and religious authorities made of the crisis? Are there noticeable differences in the reactions of different faith-based communities? What examples of best practices can be noticed, and how can the rest of us learn from them?

Professor Gilles Kepel, the first speaker of the panel, introduced the complex geopolitical situation that the Middle East found itself in in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. As he reminded the audience, the region has been also facing the fall in oil prices, the struggle between regional and global powers that highly impacted the response to crises as well as the increased assertiveness of Turkish regional policies. The second speaker, Professor Walter Homolka, then concentrated on the experience of Jewish communities and their adaptation to new public health regulations imposed in reaction to the pandemic. He specifically highlighted the peculiarities of online religious services, as well as the unequal social and economic consequences that the pandemic imposed on different Jewish communities. Finally, H.E. Hussam Zomlot stressed the universal impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, while focusing more closely on the situation in Palestine and the abilities of different actors to face the pandemic in a particularly difficult political context.

PANEL II: THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGION IN DIPLOMACY TODAY

Chair: **Dr. Jan Šnidauf**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

- **Dr. Robert Řehák**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
- **Dr. Merete Bilde**, European External Action Service of the European Union
- **Prof. Peter Mandaville**, George Mason University

- **Elham Alshejni**, KAICIID Dialogue Centre
- **Hayder Al-Khoei**, Al-Khoei Institute

[Panel II - video](#)

The second panel moved the discussion to the relevance of intercultural and interfaith dialogue, or even religion in general for contemporary diplomacy. The panel thus highlighted diverse experiences and lessons learned in the areas identified by the following questions: What is the understanding, level of acceptance, and personal experience – in general terms of relevance - of religion among diplomats today? What kind of change or adjustment can we observe in this respect due to the current pandemic? What role might religious authorities and institutions have in the upcoming socio-economic crisis?

Elham Alsheini opened the debate by stressing the need to include religious representatives in particular roles in diplomatic efforts and pointing to organizations such as the UN that already showed that religion matters in diplomatic affairs even though the two have different roles that should not be merged. Professor Peter Mandaville made the case in his intervention that engagement with religious actors by diplomats potentially holds enormous utility for advancing a wide range of foreign policy concerns. However, the question for him is how to increase religious literacy among diplomats and what religious literacy is in this regard. Closely following this argument, Professor Merete Bilde stated that it is important to understand where religion stands between the governmental space and the civil society space and find the right balance in the sense of not putting too much or too little emphasis on it. Haydar al-Khoei in turn warned against the instrumentalization of religion by anyone who seeks to advance political goals through it and pointed to a number of examples of unsuccessful or even harmful past attempts to do so. Finally, Robert Řehák introduced the religious context of the Czech Republic and how the intercultural and interfaith initiatives pursued by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs fit into it.

PANEL 3: MULTILATERAL YOUTH NETWORKS AND FUTURE COMMUNITIES

Chair: **Nikola Strachová**, Institute of International Relations Prague

- H.E. **Elisabeth Guigou**, Anna Lindh Foundation
- **Dr. Dodik Ariyanto**, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
- **Zinab Abdelfatah Zidan**, Young Mediterranean Voices
- **Viet Do Pham**, Czech Viet Education Institute
- **Jakub Můčka**, Atlas of Today's World

[Panel III - video](#)

The third panel of the conference sought to discuss the role of civil society and youth in shaping the post-pandemic communities. Undoubtedly, the pandemic does not represent a health crisis, but it has also had significant social consequences that civil society reacted to in diverse forms. Therefore, the panellists were asked to elaborate on the following questions: What are the best ways of promoting the role of civil society in governmental actions and what type of assistance do non-governmental actors need in order to improve their performances? Furthermore, has the Covid-19 crisis somehow created a new concept of solidarity?

Speaking first, H.E. Elisabeth Gigou highlighted the imperative of enhancing the interaction between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea in order to counter the cultural wars between them and stressed the need to educate the youth to prevent the spread of disinformation and messages of violence and distrust. Dodik Aryanto warned that the pandemic has also exacerbated inequalities, and new divisions are reflected also in the rise of xenophobia, discrimination and ethno-cultural racism. The issue of disinformation and its potential effect in terms of supporting extremism and radicalisation was featured also in the intervention of Zinab Abdelfatah Zidan, who further introduced some initiatives aimed at countering the spread of fake news and hatred. Viet do Pham moved the discussion to the Czech context and the issue of the Czech Vietnamese minority, while pointing to various examples of pandemic solidarity on the part of this community. Finally, Jakub Múčka reflected on the impact of the present crises on the international society and underlined the importance of citizen-led initiatives aimed at education and tackling disinformation.

CLOSING REMARKS

Chair: **Dr. Jan Daniel**, Institute of International Relations Prague

- **H.E. Ekmeleddin M. İhsanoğlu**, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
- **Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer**, KAICIID Dialogue Centre
- **Miloš Toušek**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

[Closing remarks - video](#)

The conference was concluded by a round of closing remarks. Jan Daniel thanked all the speakers on behalf of the Institute of International Relations and summarized the main points discussed in the conference, while highlighting especially its forward-looking and action-oriented theme. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu in turn underlined the need to draw on shared values between the West and Muslim world in order to overcome looming polarization and extremist voices on both sides. Mohammed Abu-Nimer



then focused on the importance of building resilience in our societies to withstand imminent challenges and turn them into opportunities for building better relations between people, states and cultures. The final speaker of the event, Mr Toušek as a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, expressed his gratitude to all guests of the conference for reflecting upon the sensitive topics of the event elegantly, with respect and responsibility.

Throughout the conference, the speakers tackled the current crises and potential ways of its overcoming from a wide range of different angles, reflecting thus the diversity of their national, professional and religious backgrounds and wealth of their experience. In this respect, the conference fulfilled its goal in bringing people together and provide a platform where different ideas can be shared, critically discussed and evaluated and where the participants can find an inspiration that will help them in building richer future communities.