

Mr. Afifi (spoke in Arabic):

The world is today experiencing disturbances and instability as a result of the constant violence and the intolerance, extremism and excess that have brought harm so many nations, in particular in the Arab and Muslim worlds, where security and stability are threatened and strife and killing have become widespread. That has led to the destruction of homes and infrastructure in acts of barbarity unseen in history. This phenomenon has surpassed all religious and moral limits and human traditions. It is extremely painful that those crimes are being perpetrated in the name of Islam. That has been exploited by the media in the worst way possible to distort the image of Islam and to present it to the world as if it were a barbaric religion thirsty for the blood of the innocent. In reality we do not need to defend or refute the fact that these crimes have no relation whatever to religions or human traditions.

The Koran states that God only sent Mohammed the Prophet as a blessing unto all beings and unto the world, which is much broader than the word “Muslims”. In Islamic philosophy it is even broader than the world of humans, to include the world of plants and animals, as well as objects. The Koran includes a verse directed at the Prophet Mohammed:

“We sent thee not but as a mercy for all creatures.” (The Holy Koran, XXI: 107)

Addressing all people, the Prophet Mohammed stated that he was a gift of mercy from God. But he was also merciful of animals, telling us that a woman had entered the fires of hell because she had kept a cat without feeding it or allowing it to eat from the land. He also told us that a man had been forgiven and allowed to enter paradise for giving water to a dog on a hot day. Therefore, if Islam teaches mercy unto animals, then mercy unto human beings is something that Islam of course also calls for. The dignity of human beings in Islam derives from their very humanity, regardless of colour, religion or race. Islam views the world as a single family with a global citizenship that enjoys knowledge of one another and cooperation. God has addressed humankind, stating:

“Oh, mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other” (ibid, XLIX:13).

The Al Azhar Islamic Research Academy has worked to combat the ideology of these organizations that practice violence and killing and threaten peace in societies. It has demonstrated the relationship of these groups to the Khawarij, who emerged in the early history of Islam owing to a deviation in their theology, which led to the takfiri ideology. While that group was defeated in the past, the phenomenon has re-emerged at the hands of young men and women who are not qualified — by virtue of discipline, learning or culture — to know Islam in its reality, except through their excitement, passion and extreme reactions. Accordingly, they fell victim to that ideology. As such, their ideas are not based on genuine jurisprudence. We have seen distorted ideologies and concepts that run contrary to the religion spread through social media, including the takfiri notion on governance and the concepts of jihad, the caliphate, a Muslim State, migration and the idea of a “home of war”.

Those themes are common to all terrorist organizations like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which have been based on the ideas of Abi Allah Al-Maududi, Sayyid Qutb and other founders of intolerant and extreme ideology that when combined with violence becomes terrorism. However, extremism exists not only in the area of intellectual discipline; when it takes on violent behaviours to attack property and lives, they are then armed terrorist organizations used to attack States and societies.

The Al Azhar Islamic Research Academy is making strenuous efforts in the area of education in order to highlight the real ideas and concepts of Islam. That includes the many scholarships we provide for students at our various institutes and colleges. There are now 40,000 students at Al Azhar from 130 countries throughout the world. As part of our global role to spread Islam's tolerant teachings, without excess or extremism, Al Azhar is also providing training courses for imams and preachers from various countries of the world so as to provide a strong foundation for the coexistence of Islam and to denounce extremism and urge respect for national laws and religious pluralism.

At the regional level, Al Azhar is working with the various factions in Syria, Iraq and to bring them together to address the politicization of sectarian conflict and reject the efforts of ISIL, which is exploiting sectarian differences to gain ground. Al Azhar is also working globally through the Muslim Council of Elders, which is led by the Sheikh of Al Azhar and includes members from different nations of the Muslim world, to spread international peace. The Council, in cooperation with Al Azhar, has launched peace convoys to 15 nations throughout the world.

Al Azhar has also established a digital observatory to monitor what ISIL publishes on social networks, where we discuss extremist ideas and refute their fatwas, that is, their religious rulings, in a number of languages, including English, French, Italian, German, Spanish and Chinese, in order to warn young men and women about the danger of ISIL's ideology and prevent them from falling victim to that organization. Al Azhar views the confrontation between ISIL and other terrorist organizations in the world as a cause that requires a number actions, the most important of which are the following.

Due concern must be given to discussing extremist ideas and refuting them. Young men and women must be encouraged, through social networks and international cooperation, to counteract the ability of these organizations to exploit the virtual world to market terrorism. Common human values must be valued and emphasized. We must avoid relating the conduct of terrorism to religion. We must uphold the role of religious leaders and foster dialogue among them. We must work to spread the concepts of the peaceful coexistence among peoples. We must focus on the role of young people, support them and integrate them in the economy and politics of different societies by offering them job opportunities and protecting them from extremist ideologies. We must support women, respect their capabilities and include them in all efforts to achieve justice among peoples. We must not discriminate and we must respect the particularities of all societies. We must focus on education and develop curriculums that promote peaceful coexistence and respect for the other, for global citizenship and for the plurality of religions and societies. We must engage all leaders of the world in a genuine confrontation of terrorism, which is now threatening international peace and security and stability and whose threat is rapidly growing. We hope for a world that enjoys peace, stability and coexistence and respects humankind.

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