



UNAOC

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations GROUP OF FRIENDS HIGH-LEVEL MEETING



21 September 2023, New York

1. INTRODUCTION



On the margins of the 78th United Nations General Assembly high-level week, on 21 September 2023, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) held its Group of Friends high-level meeting in New York. The event highlighted the advocacy work of UNAOC, institutional developments, ongoing programmes and projects, the 2022–2023 progress made on the implementation of the UNAOC High Representative’s mandate as the United Nations focal point for monitoring antisemitism and enhancing a system-wide response. An outline of the planned activities in 2024 was provided as well.

Up to 70 Member States delegations and international organizations participated in the meeting. It was streamed live on UN Web TV and embedded on the UNAOC website. The event was covered live on social media with the primary hashtag #UNAOCGoF2023, and reached over 83,606 accounts with more than 200 interactions. Further, mentions of “UNAOC

Group of Friends” generated a total reach of over 126,000 across major platforms. The event recording can be accessed on the UNAOC website: <https://www.unaoc.org/gof2023/>.



Scan this QR code on your mobile phone to watch the recording of the UNAOC Group of Friends meeting

2. OPENING SEGMENT

The **High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations**, H.E. Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos (chair of the meeting), welcomed all participants and opened his remarks by recognizing the invaluable political and financial support of the Group of Friends and the partners of UNAOC in enabling UNAOC to deliver on its mandate, guided by the Action Plan for 2019-2023.¹



The year 2023 marks two important milestones: the midpoint in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both of which are critical for achieving peace. With widening geopolitical divisions, escalating conflicts, worsening inequalities and reversing gender equality, shifting the paradigm from hate and intolerance to solidarity and compassion as a way of life is crucial. The challenges which we are facing can be addressed only through stronger international cooperation. UNAOC stands ready to work with all its friends and partners who choose dialogue and negotiations as a pathway to a peaceful world.

H.E. Mr. Dennis Francis, **President of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly**, reiterated that the work of the Alliance becomes as critical as ever as part of the toolkit to reverse the trajectory of violence and despair, and in finding new pathways to kindle actions devoted to unity and solidarity among all peace-loving nations. Having “peace” as one of the four pillars of the theme for his Presidency of the United Nations General Assembly, Mr. Francis outlined three points of convergence and cooperation to achieve our shared goal of tolerant and peaceful societies. First, fighting disinformation and hateful rhetoric; second, recognizing women as agents of peace; and third, protecting rights to education, which is critical in fostering respect, tolerance and mutual understanding that underpin safe and resilient societies. The President of the United Nations General Assembly expressed his conviction that bridges can be built to achieve the urgently needed shift from conflict to collaboration. In closing, he commended the leadership of UNAOC Group of Friends members for continuing to focus on these critical issues.



¹<https://www.unaoc.org/resource/unaoc-action-plan-2019-2023/>

The High Representative provided a briefing to the membership on the progress made in the work of UNAOC over the past year and until August 2023. The activities of UNAOC support Member States in driving the 2030 Agenda, mainstreaming gender, protecting human rights, particularly the freedom of religion or belief, combating religious intolerance, advancing peaceful coexistence, and preventing and countering violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism.

Institutional Developments:

- The UNAOC Group of Friends currently consists of 160 members. Among the new members of the Group are Honduras, Nicaragua, Turkmenistan and TURKSOY.
- UNAOC strengthened its collaboration with numerous United Nations agencies and entities on the issues of the prevention of violent extremism, mediation, countering hate speech, joint programming in the areas of sport for peace, youth and education, and human rights. UNAOC regularly liaises and coordinates its work with UNOCT/UNCCT, UN-Women, UNFPA, UNESCO, IOM, DPPA, DESA, OSAPG, UN Human Rights Office and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.
- Since November 2021, the office of UNAOC at the Palais des Nations in Geneva became operational. Through its presence in UNOG with a senior staff seconded by the Government of Türkiye, UNAOC maintains greater engagement and collaboration with Member States missions in Geneva and the Geneva-based United Nations entities. Several advocacy activities have been convened since the opening of the office. On 20 October 2023, UNAOC will organize the 2nd Glob-

al Dialogue: “Towards the World of #OneHumanity – The Role of Artificial Intelligence” in UNOG.

- As part of strengthening UNAOC within the United Nations architecture, the High Representative was granted the delegated authority by the Secretary-General. The delegation of authority framework emphasizes transparency, accountability and decision-making closer to the mandate and programme delivery point. In 2022 and 2023, the High Representative entered a Senior Manager’s Compact, a key performance management tool through which he communicates directly to the Secretary-General the priorities of the entity and objectives for the upcoming year and, upon the year-end, reports on the progress made.
- As of April 2023, a Director for UNAOC at the D2 level was appointed through a 14-month competitive process.

Mandates and Initiatives:

- The work of UNAOC in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue and expanding its policy, advocacy work and related programming found due recognition in the United Nations General Assembly resolutions. It is also recognized in the Secretary-General’s reports covering issues that fall under the mandate of UNAOC across its pillars and initiatives. In 2023, UNAOC became a co-penholder and lead coordinator in the preparation of the Secretary-General’s report on the “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace”, to be published in Fall 2023. It has also contributed to the 2022 High-level Forum on the Culture of Peace and to the Secretary-General’s report on the “Terrorist attacks on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of

intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief”.² The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: eighth review, encouraged UNAOC to pursue initiatives that promote diversity, pluralism and tolerance.³

- UNAOC continued to expand the scope and network of religious leaders, faith actors and faith-based organizations, promoting interfaith and interreligious dialogue as part of its mandate. With a renewed term, UNAOC continued to co-chair the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development. It continued to streamline the work of the Task Force and strengthen the cooperation with its Multi-Faith Advisory Council (MFAC).
- Under the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites,⁴ UNAOC completed phase 1 of the mapping exercise. Launched in July 2023, the online map of Sweden spans a total of 4,458 religious sites across 13 denominations. Together with UNOCT, UNICRI and CTED, UNAOC developed a good practices module on protecting religious sites from terrorist attacks.⁵ This specialized guide is available in English, Arabic, French and Russian.
- As the United Nations Focal Point to monitor antisemitism and to enhance a system-wide response, UNAOC is working on the United Nations Action Plan to address the issue.
- UNAOC continued to provide advice to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General on Islamophobia. The High Representative remained to be outspoken about the manifestations of anti-

Muslim hatred and acts of Islamophobia such as the burning of the Quran.

Advocacy and Policy Initiatives:

- The highlight of the advocacy work in 2022 was convening the 9th Global Forum in Fez, generously hosted by the Kingdom of Morocco under the leadership of His Majesty King Mohammed VI. For the first time since 2005, the Forum was held in the African continent, providing a unique opportunity to reflect on the strong cultural identity in Africa, common heritage and shared values of the entire humanity. It also allowed UNAOC to expand its presence and partnerships with African stakeholders.
- UNAOC continues to deliver on its #OneHumanity Campaign that aims at enforcing the notion of sports as an equalizer for social inclusion, bringing people together from diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities.
- As one of the entities in the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact and Vice-chair of the Working Group on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism under the chairmanship of UNOCT, UNAOC continues to co-implement the “United Nations Global Programme on Security of Major Sporting Events, and Promotion of Sport and Its Values as a Tool to Prevent Violent Extremisms” and the Global Program on Countering Terrorist Threats Against Vulnerable Targets.

² A/77/266.

³ A/RES/77/298.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/12-09-2019-UNAOC-PoA-Religious-Sites.pdf>

⁵ https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/2118451e-vt-mod4-religious_sites_final-web.pdf



In his remarks, H.E. Mr. José Manuel Albares Bueno, **Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of the Kingdom of Spain**, recognized the critical role of UNAOC in building solidarity, trust and effective teamwork for the future of humanity. Since 2022, Spain has raised its contribution to EURO 1 million per year. The Minister thanked the High Representative for activities developed by UNAOC across its pillars and noted that the Action Plan 2019-2023 and the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites are essential instruments to fight intolerance, as there can be no true peace without a culture of dialogue and respect. The Minister underscored the urgent need to move from a culture of “reaction” to a culture of “prevention” by strengthening the role of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a tool for conflict prevention and resolution. Prevention enables long-term political and social progress and human security, creating conditions necessary to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. The Minister also highlighted the efforts of UNAOC in promoting women’s participation in peacebuilding and promoting dialogue, which complement the efforts of Spain in ensuring that there are more women in the mediation and peacebuilding processes. Spain is eager to work more closely with UNAOC on this agenda.

The **Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye**, H.E. Mr. Hakan Fidan, began his remarks by recalling that Türkiye and Spain launched the Alliance to stem the tide of intolerance and extremism and to promote peaceful coexistence. The Minister thanked the High Representative for his work and for the journey of UNAOC over the past 18 years to become one of the most prominent peace initiatives of today. The Minister noted the global rise in xenophobia, intolerance and racism, along with various forms and manifestations, such as Islamophobia and antisemitism. He underscored that the vile attacks on the Holy Quran constitute an insult to all religions and manifest a new form of racism. Türkiye regrets that crimes of hatred openly and publicly are tolerated under the guise of freedom of expression, and it calls on all countries and international organizations to take efficient and deterrent steps against Islamophobia and racism. Türkiye welcomes the recent resolutions adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council that defined the burning of holy books as religious hatred and a violation of international law. Türkiye will continue to play an active role in combating these trends by leading initiatives at the international forums. In closing, the Minister reiterated a firm commitment of Türkiye to continuous engagement and dialogue in pursuit of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding. He expressed his confidence that all UNAOC Group of Friends members will continue this noble and crucial pursuit.

3. PLENARY SEGMENT



The plenary segment of the meeting provided the Group of Friends membership with the space to discuss and provide feedback and recommendations on the work of UNAOC performed within the past months. Among the primary reflections and proposals of the delegates were the following:

Mandates:

The UNAOC Plan of Action for 2019-2023

- In its last year of implementation, delegations welcomed the positive results achieved by UNAOC in the fulfillment of its Plan of Action for 2019-2023 under the leadership of the High Representative. Fostering dialogue and cooperation between different cultures, religions and civilizations, as well as building bridges that unite peoples and individuals beyond their differences, represents a significant challenge. The Group of Friends members acknowledged the value and efforts of UNAOC in achieving these goals.
- Delegations reiterated the need to cooperate

to strengthen peace, stability and progress by promoting tolerance and understanding between different cultures and religions. Multilateralism, solidarity and global cooperation are essential to overcome today's challenges. The work of UNAOC has even greater meaning when we look back to the past 12 months, during which, as a dire legacy of the global coronavirus pandemic, the world witnessed a surge of intolerance, religious stigma, xenophobia and hate speech. In their statements, delegations condemned all forms of racism, discrimination, bigotry, xenophobia, intolerance and hatred against any religion, race and ethnicity.

- Several delegates welcomed the widening scope of outreach undertaken by UNAOC to engage community and faith leaders to address the root

causes of societal disruption, promote a culture of peace and coexistence, and fight intolerance. UNAOC was encouraged to ensure even greater inclusivity in the inter-religious dialogue efforts, encompassing all faiths.

- Member States encouraged UNAOC to continue to work in the five priority areas of education, youth, immigration, media and women, and to play a greater role in promoting equal treatment, mutual respect and mutual learning among different civilizations. They further recognized its work in the areas of education for global citizenship, improving media literacy and combatting hate speech, empowering youth to promote sustainable peace and prevent violent extremism, the #OneHumanity Campaign and the continuation of the United Nations Global Programme on Security of Major Sporting Events and Promotion of Sport and Its Values as a Tool to Prevent Violent Extremism.
- It has been noted that, moving forward, media and digital literacy will be essential to enabling communities to resist divisive narratives. Youth-oriented educational efforts in this area should be a priority for UNAOC. At the community level, UNAOC was suggested to emphasize measuring impact and scaling up successful models of its activities.
- Several delegations reiterated their commitment to accelerating the contribution of women to peace and security. In this context, they welcomed the pilot initiative “Strengthening Young Women Peacebuilders’ Capacity in Complex Crisis”, launched by UNAOC in partnership with UN-Women, UNFPA and UNICEF.
- UNAOC was commended for its valuable cooperation in drafting the “Arab Strategy for

Tolerance and Peace” along with The Global Council for Tolerance and Peace.

Addressing antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racism and intolerance:

- A few delegations welcomed the work of UNAOC on preparing the United Nations Plan of Action on Monitoring Antisemitism and Enhancing a System-Wide Response.
- Several delegates expressed concerns about the rise of Islamophobic incidents in recent months. The United Nations General Assembly passed the resolution to observe 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia⁶, acknowledging the dangers and pervasive nature of the threat of Islamophobia. Delegations called on UNAOC to address the growing trend of the phenomenon and to develop concrete proposals. UNAOC was also recommended to establish a vigilant mechanism to track instances of Islamophobia around the world. One of the delegations noted that this is the appropriate moment for the United Nations Secretary-General to initiate an Action Plan to combat Islamophobia in collaboration with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation nations.
- Several delegations reiterated the need to enhance our understanding of other civilizations and promote positive interactions and harmonious coexistence between different civilizations, which will help prevent conflicts, jointly respond to challenges and build a better future. It was noted that defamation of any religion is an infringement of human rights, especially the right to freedom of religion or belief.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/anti-islamophobia-day>

- In reference to intolerance and discrimination, one of the delegates asked UNAOC to give an assessment of the alleged persecution against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and to protect the right of people for freedom of religion or belief.

The United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites:

- The United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites remains an important framework to protect religiously significant sites and ensure conditions for safe and peaceful worship. Some delegations suggested that the Plan is a pivotal tool to tackle the current global context where polarization, tensions, intolerance and inequalities prevail in many parts of the world through multilateralism, prevention and cooperation. They also expressed appreciation for the work done by UNAOC in the preliminary mapping exercise of religious sites, noting the already completed map in Sweden.
- A number of delegations condemned the recent burning of sacred books such as the Holy Quran and the attacks on religious sites in several countries around the world. Delegations expressed concerns about increased extremism, xenophobia, racism and intolerance. They consider those attacks and burning of sacred books not only a provocation and an act of hatred and incitement to violence, but also a violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief and contrary to the provision of safe worship to Muslim communities. Mr. Moratinos, in his capacity as the High Representative, was called to invest his political capital in engaging on such a crucial issue. A group of countries suggested adopting a joint declaration, with the support of UNAOC, against any actions aimed at insulting, tearing, or desecrating the Holy Quran and any other holy books, as these actions run counter to

all human values and religious freedom.

- One of the delegates drew the audience's attention to the destruction of mosques and other Islamic monuments and sites in some countries. UNAOC was advised to develop a roster of threatened religious sites across the globe and seek assurances of their safety and integrity from the concerned governments.

Partnerships:

- The Group of Friends members commended and encouraged the efforts of UNAOC in partnering with the youth, civil society, religious leaders and faith actors, and the private sector. Some urged UNAOC to further strengthen partnerships with regional bodies, such as ASEAN, the African Union and the Alliance of Sahel States.
- They called for close collaboration and synergies with other United Nations system agencies and offices, such as UNOCT, UNESCO, UN-Women, ILO and IOM. Expanding partnerships with creative approaches can help solve funding concerns by sharing project costs with partners.

Institutional and Financial Support:

- Delegations warmly thanked the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco for hosting the 9th UNAOC Global Forum in Fez in November 2022. They also appreciated the proposal of the Government of Portugal to host the 10th UNAOC Global Forum in 2024.
- Several Member States reiterated their commitment to continue providing financial support to the UNAOC voluntary trust fund. A group of countries expressed their view that the United Nations should move gradually to fund UNAOC from the regular budget of the United

Nations and to encourage the Chair of the Fifth Committee to initiate some discussion on this issue at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Recent International and National Initiatives of the Group of Friends:

- Brazil was the penholder of a resolution entitled “The incompatibility between democracy and racism”, presented by MERCOSUR at the Human Rights Council in 2023. Acknowledging the complementarity of the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance with the long-term construction of a democratic, non-discriminatory and multicultural society, the text condemns the use of hate speech, both online and offline, to provoke stigmatization and violence. The women, peace and security agenda is one of the seven priorities of Brazil in its current mandate in the Security Council.
- In China, the President proposed a “Global Civilization Initiative”, advocating respect for the diversity of world civilizations, promoting shared values of all humanity, attaching importance to the inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and strengthening international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation.
- The theme of India’s G20 Presidency was *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, meaning “the world is one family”. It was a reflection of India’s commitment to the welfare of the entire humanity and dedication to global unity and peace. It was also part of the national philosophy to celebrate unity in diversity.
- Through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Indonesia established a Forum of interreligious

harmony in all its provinces and cities. Internationally, it has partnered bilaterally with at least 34 countries to organize interfaith, intercultural and inter-media dialogues. As a Chair of ASEAN, Indonesia convened an interfaith and intercultural dialogue on the regional level in 2023.

- Kazakhstan highlighted the 7th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, held in Astana in September 2022. The event brought together a record number of 100 delegations from 50 countries, including His Holiness Pope Francis, His Eminence Dr. Ahmed El-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and other eminent religious leaders and figures. At the occasion of the Group of Friends meeting, Kazakhstan called all members to jointly promote the concepts and principles of the Congress’s Declaration.
- Mexico highlighted the recent creation of the Ibero-American Network of Women Mediators, where, as a founding member and president, Mexico seeks to promote the role of women as actors of peace, conciliators of conflicts, mediators and promoters of social development.
- Following the 9th UNAOC Global Forum in Fez, Morocco, the Euro-Med University established a Chair of the Alliance of Civilizations, promoting activities with and for young people, including young women, strengthening sports and studies sectors. Morocco has also initiated the United Nations General Assembly resolution on “Promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue and tolerance in countering hate speech”⁷, adopted in July 2023. It will hold the 2nd edition of the Tangier Dialogue, which will serve as an opportunity to bring together scholars, civil society, international and governmental

⁷ A/RES/77/318.

organizations to draw recommendations and roadmaps on the promotion of peace, intercultural engagement and youth empowerment.

- The Philippines continues to champion interreligious and intercultural dialogue to achieve peace and stability, including through the biennial United Nations General Assembly resolution on the “Promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace”. As the co-host of the recent Basketball World Cup 2023, the Philippines highlighted the power of sports in contributing to peace and international solidarity.
- Portugal will organize the 10th Global Forum of UNAOC in Lisbon, in 2024, marking the 20th anniversary of the Alliance. The Forum will be a timely opportunity to continue to contribute to reinforcing the international system, as well as Portugal’s national commitment to combat extremism, violence and intolerance. The year 2024 will be the moment to take stock of the Alliance’s two decades of work and look at the prospects for the coming years, focusing on building new bridges toward a peaceful and sustainable future.
- On the margins of the Swedish’s presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Sweden recognized the contribution of UNAOC at the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism. The national plan to combat all forms of racism, related intolerance and hate crime, adopted by Sweden in 2016, was recently complemented by several action programmes to combat Islamophobia, antisemitism and Afrophobia. The Swedish Foreign Minister has invited the Secretary General of the OIC to visit Sweden. The United Nations Special rapporteur on freedom of religion will visit the country in mid-October 2023.
- The United Arab Emirates spearheaded the adoption of the resolution on the “Tolerance, international peace and security”⁸ by the Security Council in June 2023. The resolution offers pathways for Member States and the United Nations to supercharge efforts to address hate speech, intolerance and extremism.
- In its commitment towards combating Islamophobia, in February 2023, the European Union appointed a coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred, who works to ensure a robust and holistic response to anti-Muslim hatred in education, employment and social policy. It continues to implement the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life, as well as the EU Anti-racism Action Plan. The EU’s Global Exchange on Religion in Society, a platform that aims to connect civil society actors inside and outside Europe and to enable a sustained exchange about how we live together in a globalized world of highly diverse societies, continues to give voice and visibility to the contribution by civil society actors, whether young or old, believers or non-believers, to practical questions such as how to promote cultural diversity and a stronger sense of belonging.
- The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) highlighted the efforts in bridging the religious divide through its publication of the first part of a Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief, based on inputs from its member Parliaments. Building on the findings from the report, the IPU organized an International Conference on

⁸ S/RES/2686.

Interfaith Dialogue, in cooperation with the Parliament of Morocco and Religions for Peace, and with support from UNAOC, in Marrakesh, in June 2023. The conference concluded with the Marrakech Communiqué, which affirms that interfaith dialogue that is grounded in support of fundamental rights and freedoms is an essential tool for promoting inclusivity and peaceful coexistence, upholding the rule of law and encouraging collective efforts to achieve a better society.

- The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) supports programmes that build understanding and assist governments in shaping policies that support inclusion across ethnic, religious, gender and generational divides. OSCE is deeply engaged in conflict prevention, including through the work of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.
- In September 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) sent a high-level mission to Amman, Ramallah and Jerusalem and is planning a high-level conference in the Middle East region. In 2024, PAM will host the Plenary Session in Braga, Portugal, and the 2nd Women's Parliamentary Forum in Paris, France.



List of Speakers of the Opening and Plenary Segments

(Reflecting the order of taking the floor)

- High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations
- President of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
- Türkiye
- Spain
- Portugal
- Pakistan
- Hungary
- Serbia
- Belarus
- Brunei Darussalam
- League of Arab States (LAS)
- Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)
- Kazakhstan
- Islamic Republic of Iran
- Philippines
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
- Morocco
- Sweden
- Mexico
- Burkina Faso
- Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM)
- United Arab Emirates
- Qatar
- TURKSOY (International Organization of Turkic Culture)
- Malaysia
- European Union (EU)
- China
- Egypt
- Brazil
- India
- Indonesia
- Russian Federation