

Speech by Mr Mansour Al-Nogaigan

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Madam Director General of UNESCO

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me, on behalf of all of my colleagues and friends here, to express my solidarity with the people of France and Denmark, with journalists and the press, and with the Jewish communities that have been targeted by terrorist extremists in Paris, Copenhagen and Brussels. It pains me that such crimes are perpetrated in the name of Islam: A religion whose very name is derived from the word “peace”. This dark ideology has been persecuting, torturing and killing countless innocent Muslim victims in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Nigeria, as well as many Christians and Yezidis.

Before us today lies a challenge that has been described as a “generational struggle against a poisonous political ideology”. The question is: how can we, as civil society actors, unite our capacities to prevail over this enemy which has been mobilizing thousands of our youths – Arab and European? We are in a daily struggle where the internet has also become one of the biggest battle grounds, with extremist propaganda traveling freely in cyberspace without any supervision or accountability or condemnation, serving as a major recruitment tool for terrorist organizations drawing to their ranks young people from all countries, including democratic nations.

Since the founding of Al Mesbar Centre for Studies and Research nine years ago, the Centre has published some one hundred books in Arabic which monitor, analyze and confront the conduct and ideology of political Islamist groups and organizations. Also highlighted and discussed in our books are issues of ethnic and religious minorities and the status of women in our region. We regularly hold conferences, training seminars and workshops with policy makers and media experts about these issues in addition to offering advice and recommendations to key policymakers in the region. We have concluded from our experiences that our region suffers from frailty in the foundations that does not allow for enlightened ideas to prosper and win the battle of hearts and minds against extremism. Part of the problem lies in the absence of tolerance, dialogue, and respect for the others, the very

values that have assembled us all here. This particularly affects ethnic and religious minorities, who find themselves victims of every upheaval in the region.

There are numerous factors that contribute to the growth and spread of terrorism, and taking such underlying causes helps us in our mission to find a solution to this problem and be more successful in helping our societies and our youth. But however significant political, social, and economic factors may be in nurturing terrorism, we must not overlook the fundamental fact that lies in front of us in every direction: the common denominator all unites these terrorist groups across the globe is the radical religious ideology. I do not exaggerate in saying, based on our experience, that religious thought in and by itself, even in its strict form, does not necessarily produce terrorism. But conversely, even moderate religious thought can become a source of terrorism and violence if it morphs into a totalitarian ideology.

Here I am not addressing a particular religion, or followers of any particular faith or sect. I am referring to the ideological, religious, and intellectual reservoir that feeds these groups. In other words, we are after the nest of the snake. This is the major battle that illuminated Muslims, be they clerics, intellectuals or thinkers, must wage first and foremost within our faith community, so as to find support from our counterparts in other religions and cultures. A ray of hope lies in publicly discussing these ideas through dialogue: disclosing the sources of fear, the causes of anxiety and the reasons for marginalization, and ways in which we can help our young men and women create a more peaceful, less violent future.

Our ability to challenge the painful realities of today is manifested in how far we can venture beyond our comfort zone, how we can show the courage to discuss the ideas and ideologies that these organizations base themselves upon, and how we can support a culture of tolerance and respect, through programs and projects that revive hope among young people and encourage them to engage in dialogue and inculcate in them a culture of peace. Here lies our responsibility as a centre dedicated to these values.

Since January 2007, we have worked with hundreds of experts around the world in the production of our monthly books, some of which focus on the religious ideas and foundations that feed terrorists and radical groups. Some of these books address the circumstances that contribute to the rise of terrorism and the social environment that harbor it. Initially our focus was channeled to realize the fine line between religious strictness as a factor of extremism, and the role of such extremism in the violence which has some grounds in religious interpretation that infers to Koran or Sharia.

Amidst the horrible terrorist attack on January 7th in Paris which targeted free speech in France and claimed innocent lives, and amidst the international panic that followed, there were Islamist activists on social media expressing their sympathy with the criminals through religious justifications from Islam's most hideous, cruelest interpretations. Such behavior serves as a reminder that the hideousness of terrorism and death must not lead us to ignore in innate extremism in the ideology and forms of political organizations that exploit religion as a cover for their objectives.

Millions of Muslims live in France and millions other live across Europe. The vast majority reject and condemn terrorism and violence and is repelled by extremism. Several Muslims have expressed sympathy with the victims and elite intellectuals, thinkers and clerics have written to explain their position. We must encourage and back these elite in order to go ahead with a brave reformist movement that will elaborate religious doctrines, diligences, and interpretations that have poisoned the souls of youth and morphed them into monsters endangering their own communities. Although such groups are dispersed among several continents, they share one ideology and a similar interpretation of faith. Their common denominator seems to be the ideologues.

Many Muslim thinkers have written extensively about the doctrine of Muslim minorities born and bred in the West. Many arguments have risen about a "European" brand of Islam that helps Muslim youth become good integrated citizens in their countries. Over the years, Al Mesbar has published several books that focused on realizing whether European Muslims can have a different experience which can eventually inspire us in the Arab region and set an example for us to follow as a way to overcome our civilization crisis. However, it appears that the road ahead is long and winding, and responsibility for Muslim thinkers has doubled in helping Muslim youth in Europe better integrate with the communities of their birth. Al Mesbar can be a partner of UNESCO in reviving hope through programs and projects that encourage dialogue and promote a culture of peace.

In order to outdo ourselves, we must acknowledge equal status with followers of other religions, sects, communities, and cultures. We must overcome the racial, cultural, and rigid religious ideas that distort the other. We must have the confidence to discuss several "untouchable" critical matters. We must accept integration and identification with different cultures, religions and societies. I can mention in this regard examples such as accepting interreligious marriages, or even conversion from one faith to another.

Al-Mesbar plans to convene a conference revolving around interreligious dialogue next September which will be attended by an elite group of thinkers representing several religions. We also aim to conduct (International Forum for the Rapprochement of Cultures) in the first quarter of 2016 with participation of several institutes and organs of this field. On the sidelines of the forum, we will also convene workshops for the youth regarding interreligious dialogue and efforts to activate the role of arts, especially music, in supporting love, tolerance, and acceptance.

I believe the road to change is paved with three basics: First, encouraging the culture of dialogue, tolerance, and acceptance of the other. Second, supporting discourses of globalizing Islam, or re-morphing Islam back to its non-political roots. Third, reviving the idea of “individual faith” which has profound grounds in our Muslim heritage, but is confronted vigorously by religious fanatics.

Finally, we will not achieve what we aspire for unless religious authorities bear their responsibilities, and unless we promote education which is, in the words of Nelson Mandela “the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world”.