



Annual Pluralism Lecture 2014

Forced Displacement and the Promise of Pluralism

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Check against delivery

Son Altesse l'Aga Khan, Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs, je voudrais tout d'abord vous remercier pour l'opportunité de prononcer cette conférence annuelle au Centre mondial du pluralisme. C'est un véritable plaisir et un privilège. Je tiens également à remercier la délégation de l'imamat Ismaïli pour accueillir cet événement.

Today, all societies are - or are on their way to become – multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. For some this is a source of discomfort and unease. In many societies, populist politicians, playing upon fears to obtain mindless votes and irresponsible media, only interested in market shares and infotainment, manipulate feelings of anxiety and insecurity, creating artificial divisions, disrupting social cohesion and, in extreme cases, provoking persecution and conflict.

We can see this in my part of the world, in Europe, where, fuelled by the economic crisis and high levels of unemployment, anti-immigration and xenophobic parties are gaining influence. Mainstream parties are unable, or sometimes even unwilling to oppose this effectively.

Xenophobia, racism, islamophobia or the invocation of false identities diminish us all. Not only are they unable to ease the fears of what is new and unfamiliar, they tend to exacerbate them.

The reality is that with an average fertility rate of 1.5 children per woman, Europe needs immigration to sustain its economy and pay the pensions of its aging population. But this is largely an unrecognized truth.

Recently, I saw the results of an opinion poll, where people were asked 3 questions: Do you want to have more children? The answer was: no. Are you willing to do menial work? The response was: no. Would you favour more immigration? And again, people said: no!

This is an impossible discourse; an equation without solution. Immigration is not part of the problem of modern societies; it is part of the solution. Without immigration many of our communities would become completely unsustainable.

In other parts of the world where state structures are weak or non-existent and where respect for diversity is destroyed by ambition or corruption, the incapacity to identify common qualities, the lack of empathy with “the other” and the manipulation of fears by unscrupulous politicians can have tragic consequences.

When I returned from a visit from the Central African Republic earlier this year, I told the Security Council that I did not remember a field trip in my 9-year tenure as High Commissioner for Refugees that had caused me so much anguish as this one. I was shocked by the brutality and inhumanity of the violence, targeting women, men and even children only because they were Muslims. But my subsequent mission to South Sudan was equally distressing. In Gambella, Ethiopia, I saw tens of thousands of women and children seeking refuge from atrocity. Many of the children were severely malnourished and their mothers told me the horrors of the violence unleashed in their communities.

Until last year, the Central African Republic was largely a stranger to religious violence, which is why it is wrong to characterize the current situation as a religious conflict. Despite the widespread corruption and poverty, banditry and violence, Christians and Muslims had always lived side by side. Religious hatred was one of the few problems the Central African Republic did not have.

State structures had largely disintegrated and banditry was rife when the Séléka seized power in late 2012. The Séléka was an alliance of Central African rebel groups and foreign fighters and was indeed predominantly Muslim, although creating an Islamic State was not part of their agenda. But the widespread looting and killings committed by the Séléka and ex-Séléka members led to the emergence of the so-called Anti-Balaka, a combination of vigilante groups and bandits. While they called themselves Christian self-defence militias, they soon turned into an uncontrollable monster. This gave rise to a sectarian divide, mostly along religious lines, that is now tearing apart the social fabric of the country.

In South Sudan, the rift is not along religious, but ethnic lines. At its independence, the leaders of South Sudan were faced with daunting challenges. This was one of the most underdeveloped places in the world as a result of decades of war and neglect. As aid and money poured in, corruption, ethnic nepotism and competition over power and resources grew. Old disputes re-emerged and the country's leaders, all former rebels, were quick to come up with a military answer to political problems. A political squabble turned into an ethnic conflict when antagonistic leaders rallied support along ethnic lines. Soon Nuers were fighting Dinka on a larger scale than ever before, deliberately targeting civilians and turning against moderate voices within their own communities.

While a religious or ethnic conflict usually starts out with faith or ethnicity being instrumentalized for political purposes, the real danger is that these tensions then gain a dynamic of their own – a genie, that once it is out of the bottle becomes exceedingly difficult to control, let alone put back.

It is against these realities that the voice of tolerance and reason and the values of pluralism need to rise. Diversity is not a threat. Diversity represents the richness of our communities. We must stand together against all forms of irrationality and manipulation that lead to hatred, be it political populism, radical nationalism or religious fundamentalism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Globalization has been unfair, its benefits have been distributed unequally and many have been left out. The paradox of today's world is that money moves freely; goods and services also tend to move relatively freely; but people cannot. People are stopped by physical and legal barriers

One of the things I have learned in my years of public life is that markets work. Supply and demand tend to meet. In the global labour market supply and demand will also meet, legally if possible, irregularly if necessary.

Despite barriers, millions of people move from one country to another in the hope of a better future, millions of others to save their lives. They often travel alongside each other, creating the so-called asylum-migration nexus. When international migration is managed by border controls only, in an effort "to keep people out", human traffickers and smugglers are bound to prosper. There is something fundamentally wrong in a world where people have to risk their lives to seek safety and where at the end of a dangerous journey, they are not welcome or even turned away. It breaks my heart to see Syrian refugees being pushed back at the Bulgarian border, one of the European Union's external borders, or drown in the Mediterranean, as they have no other ways to find asylum.

We need more international cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination and concerted efforts to identify opportunities for legal migration. We also need international trade and globalization to become true agents of development. And we need more targeted development programmes, focused on poverty reduction, job creation and the strengthening of governance, rule of law and public services. Greater efforts should be made to address the challenges of conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace building, so that when people move, they do so out of choice, not necessity.

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Irrespective of cultural, religious or ethnic differences, men and women around the world share a common humanity. Aristotle was among the first to deny that division was the necessary outcome of diversity and this concept has been followed through by many illustrious thinkers, up to today. Seeking to identify the qualities and experiences that unite rather than divide people, pluralism can be a powerful force that fosters more harmonious, peaceful and prosperous societies.

A common value that can be found in all cultures is the idea of giving protection, of sheltering a stranger in need.

The word asylum is derived from the Greek word "asylon", or sanctuary, a designated space in each city, often a temple, where people could find safety.

Flight from persecution and the search for a protected space are central themes in all the three Abrahamic faiths, and can also be found Hindu mythology and Buddhist teachings. The Exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is a central story in the Jewish faith. In Christianity, the flight of the Holy Family from Bethlehem is studied by all children. And for Muslims, the Islamic calendar starts with the year the Prophet (PBUH) travelled to Medina to seek protection as he and his followers had come under threat. When some of the first Muslims suffered persecution in Mecca, they were given asylum by the Christian Emperor of Abyssinia, who withstood great pressure and declined precious gifts, refusing to return the refugees to their persecutors. Similarly, in the early

Middle-ages, Jews from many parts of Europe found sanctuary in Al Andalus, where they were allowed to practice their religion and had opportunities to work and trade. In particular, there is nothing in modern refugee law that was not already explicitly contained in Islamic law and traditions, since the very beginning.

It was only after the horrors of World War II that the protection of refugees became an obligation under international law. The 1951 Refugee Convention establishes who is a refugee and what their rights and responsibilities are. It also spells out the obligations that States have towards people seeking safety on their soil. *Non-refoulement*, or no-return of people in need of asylum is the cornerstone of the refugee regime. Building on this, the African Refugee Convention was adopted in 1969 and the Declaration of Cartagena about Refugees in 1984 to respond to specific regional dimensions of forced displacement in Africa and Latin America.

UNHCR was created by the UN General Assembly to lead and coordinate international action for the worldwide protection of refugees and to find solutions for them. To fulfil this mandate, my Office works together with a wide range of partners, including the Aga Khan Development Network. We have an excellent partnership with many of the Network's agencies, including in Central Asia, the Middle-east and East Africa.

While initially focusing on Europe, by the time Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan was elected High Commissioner in 1965, UNHCR had become operational in much of the developing world. Prince Saddruddin Aga Khan is still remembered with admiration as the man who steered the organization through some of the most challenging humanitarian crises of that time. He also played a key role in finding new homes, including here in Canada, for tens of thousands of South Asians who had been expelled overnight from Uganda in 1972.

Today, an unprecedented number of people are uprooted by violence and persecution. One of most dramatic situations is Syria, which saw 3 million of its citizens flee the country in little more than three years. Only five years ago, Syria was the world's second largest refugee hosting country, now Syrians are the largest group of refugees worldwide, followed by Afghans and Somalis. The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees found safety in the neighbouring countries, where communities are showing a generosity that is well beyond their means.

UNHCR recently registered the millionth Syrian refugee arriving in Lebanon. With 244 registered Syrian refugees for every 1,000 Lebanese, Lebanon already has the highest concentration of refugees than any other country. This is 295 times as many refugees per capita as the in United States and nearly 52 times as many as in Canada.

In Lebanon, as in most refugee hosting countries around the world, the strain that the large presence of refugees places on services and resources has become unbearable. The world needs to do much more to support Syria's neighbours, recognizing that this conflict has become a major threat to regional stability.

And let's not forget that contrary to the populist mantra that all asylum-seekers are on their way to the industrialized world, 86% of the world's refugees live in developing countries, compared to 70% a decade ago. Rather than seeing refugees as competitors and a burden, their presence can be an incentive to advance poor areas. We need to promote the development of refugee hosting areas,

involving refugees and local communities, rather than just handing out assistance to the refugees, year after year. Stimulating self-reliance, education and livelihood opportunities for refugees and host communities are key to fostering more harmonious relations and a better protection environment. Instead of competing over scarce resources, both communities work together to improve their future. I am convinced that this will, ultimately, help stem the flow of desperate people who move on out of necessity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Canada has a proud history of welcoming refugees. Loyalists - freemen and slaves - fleeing the American Revolution in the 18th century; Europeans leaving behind oppression, persecution and authoritarian states in the 19th and 20th centuries; Latin Americans escaping military regimes and growing numbers of refugees from other parts of the world found sanctuary in Canada.

Canada's resettlement programme is one of the largest in the world. It offers refugees who can no longer stay in their first country of asylum an opportunity to rebuild their lives. Resettlement is also a practical way of sharing the burden of developing countries that host large refugee populations. I welcome all efforts to maintain and strengthen a global and flexible resettlement programme and encourage Canada to resettle a large number of Syrian refugees.

My country, Portugal, has seen many of its people leave. Some because of oppression during 48 years of dictatorship that ended with the Carnation Revolution of 1974, others because of economic hardship. When I was in government, we commissioned a study to find out how well these people had integrated and how they perceived their new countries. The study found that the Portuguese community in Canada felt more integrated and better accepted than any of the others.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Canada is a clear demonstration that multi – cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies are not only inevitable, they are a good thing. Diversity and pluralism enrich societies and should be cherished by good governance, strong civic institutions and policies that promote respect for diversity. The recognition of our common humanity, inclusion and solidarity, tolerance and compromise are key elements of strong, cohesive and peaceful societies.

The mission of the Global Centre for Pluralism is to advance global understanding of pluralism as an ethic of respect that values diversity and to enable each and every person to realize his or her full potential as a citizen. I wish you every success in this important undertaking.

Thank you.