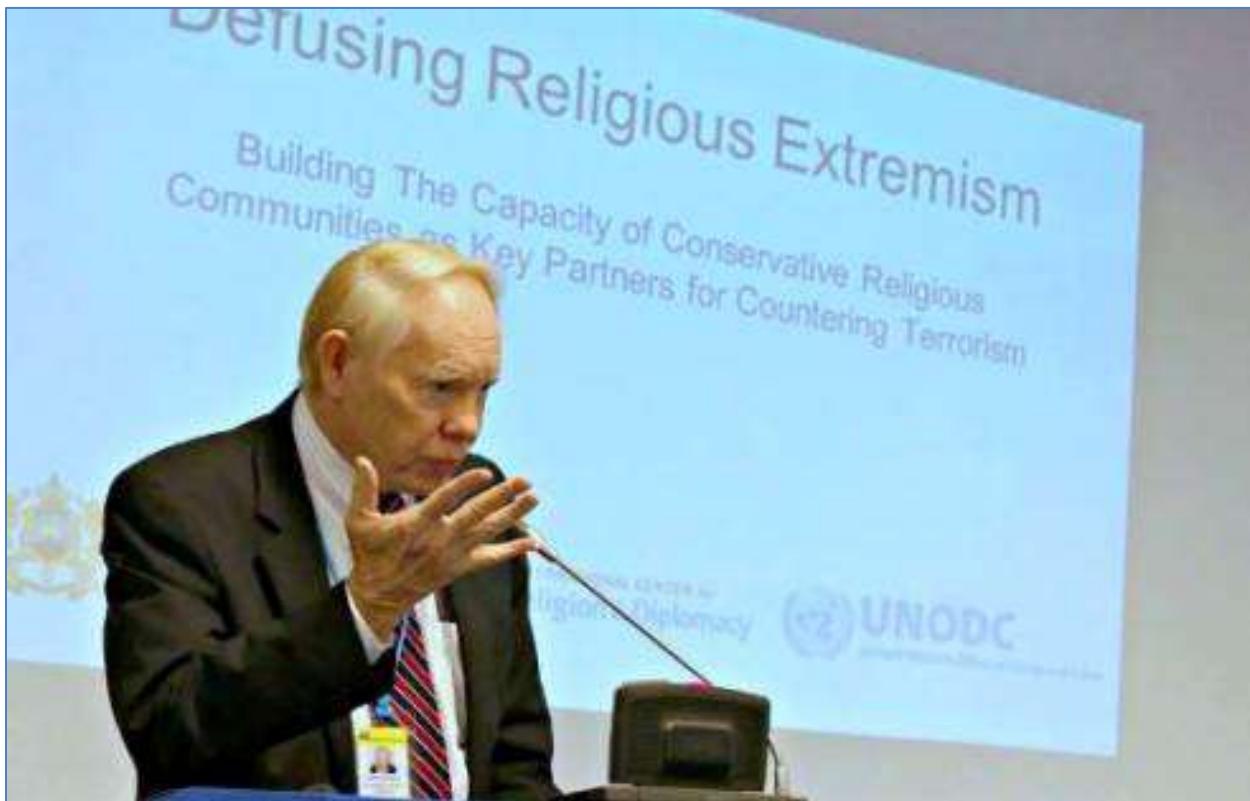


The alumni of UTS have a long association with the United Nations

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International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) president, Dr. Douglas Johnston, recipient of an honorary doctorate from UTS in 2009, addresses the UNODC

The alumnae and alumni of UTS have a long association with the United Nations (UN). Also, several Unification-related organizations have attained general or special consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or status with the UN's Department of Public Information (DPI). UTS alumni and friends regularly participate in UN events.

From May 23-27, 2016, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) held its 25th Session of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) in Vienna, Austria.

In accordance with the UNODC's function as the primary criminal justice policymaking body for the UN, this year's session was organized around the theme of identifying criminal justice responses to terrorism.

On May 24, the New York Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, held a side event at the 25th Session titled, "Defusing Religious Extremism: Building the Capacity of Conservative Religious Communities as Key Partners for Countering Terrorism."

The side event was organized by the Government of Morocco, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and the UNODC, each of which was represented at the program.

Mr. Ulrich Garms, Programme Officer of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of UNODC, opened the program, highlighting in his remarks the first of the four pillars of the UN counterterrorism strategy as being most relevant to the theme of the side event. The first pillar of the UN's counterterrorism strategy is to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, such as prolonged unresolved conflicts, a lack of rule of law, religious discrimination, and political exclusion, among others. Mr. Garms commented that there is a growing awareness within the UN community that more must be done to address these foundational causes of terrorism as a supplement to ongoing initiatives targeting terrorism in its more explicit manifestations via military, financial, and other, more political measures.

As a member of the UNODC, which seeks to develop effective legal and criminal justice responses to terrorism, Mr. Garms identified as a primary challenge the "thin line" between criminalizing speech that might foment terrorism and respecting the "fundamental freedoms of religion, expression, and association" endowed to every person.

"The question for us in the UNODC Terrorism Prevention Branch is to what extent is criminal justice also a tool that should be used to address the ideas behind the guns. There is a strong inclination now to use criminal justice to address those ideas behind the guns. But this is something that has to be handled with

great care. We in the UNODC try to provide the technical assistance to UN member states in finding the right balance in that respect.”

Dr. Mohammed Slaoui, Alternate Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations in Vienna, spoke next on behalf of the Government of Morocco, reflecting on Islam’s long history of religious tolerance and aversion to terrorism, reaffirmed and evinced most recently at the signing of the Marrakesh Declaration on January 27, 2016.

“The Declaration of Marrakesh is a perfect illustration of the true message of Islam, which supports religious freedom; and at a time when Islam is coopted and hijacked by terrorists on one hand, and on the other hand demonized by anti-Muslim groups, the international community needs to recall the unambiguous position, principles, and legacy of this religion and to hear the true voice of Islam.”

In his remarks, Dr. Slaoui also pointed to the Charter of Medina, published under the auspices of the Prophet Muhammad in 622 CE as a contract to ensure the rights of religious minorities in Muslim states and societies, as the religious and legal precedent underlying the publication of the Marrakesh Declaration.

“In a sense, the Marrakesh Declaration is a referral to the principles of the Charter of Medina for the protection of non-Muslims living in a Muslim-majority country, which inspired this recommendation.... As far as Islam is concerned, peace and security are the norm for interactions between faiths.”

Dr. Douglas Johnston, President of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) and recipient of an honorary doctorate from UTS in 2009, was the third and final speaker at the side event and spoke about the efforts of his organization to work with local religious leaders and communities to effect conflict resolution and address the causes of terrorism at the grassroots level—challenging the common conception that religion is part of the problem by making it a key element of the solution.

One of the main projects of the ICRD has been to offer conflict resolution training to civic and religious leaders in such countries as Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan, among others; and though every site requires a unique approach, Dr. Johnston reported that the ICRD has seen significant outcomes in counteracting terrorism and emboldening more peaceful religious leaders and schools of thought through this process.

Since 2003, for instance, the ICRD has worked with madrassa leaders in Pakistan to expand their curriculums to include the social and natural sciences alongside the study of Islamic scriptures, with an emphasis on religious tolerance and human rights, in order to enhance the practice of critical and creative thinking among madrassa faculty and students. Such reforms are always offered by the ICRD to madrassa leaders as suggested changes and are grounded in Islamic principles.

Dr. Johnston commented on this interactive process of collaboration and training, “Once you penetrate the veneer of rage and hostility and engage these leaders, not only do they get it but many of them become champions of what you’re talking about—often at great personal risk to themselves.” It is ultimately through these and other approaches rooted in honoring Islam and collaborating with local leaders as equals that the ICRD hopes to combat the errant radicalization of Islamic teachings by terrorist forces.