

## UPF New York, United States: United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week

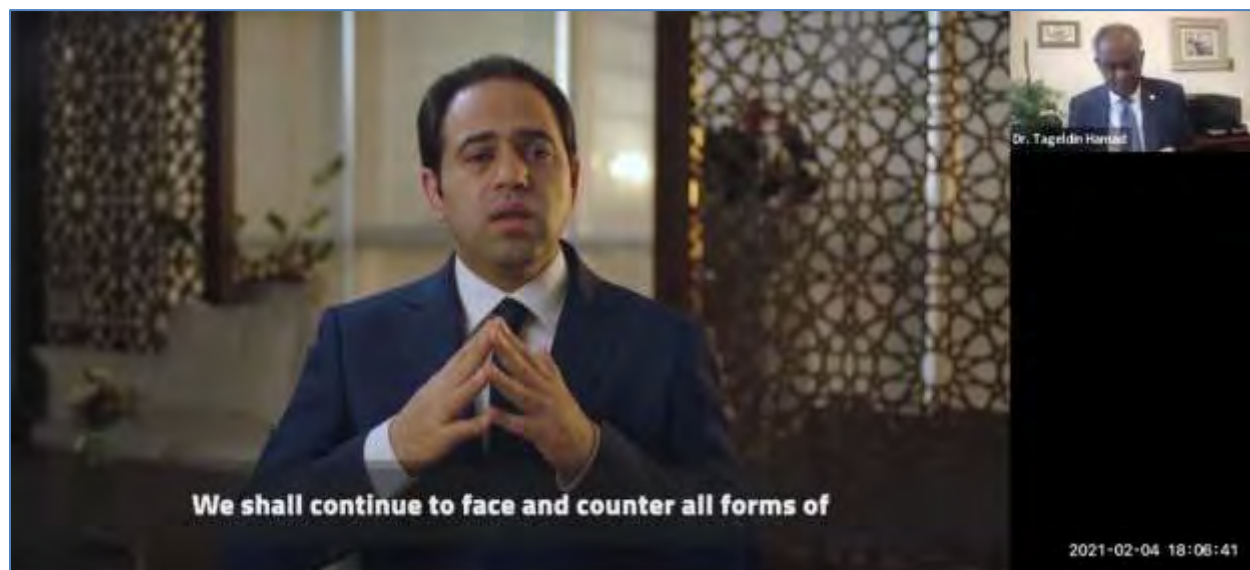
Aidan Walsh  
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[20210204 - Dialogue toward Peace, Harmony and Fraternity - English video](#) from [UPF Europe and Middle East](#) on [Vimeo](#).

New York, United States -- A UPF webinar commemorated two United Nations observances: World Interfaith Harmony Week and the first International Day of Human Fraternity. To watch the webinar in its original audio, [click here](#).

UPF of Europe and the Middle East, together with the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a UPF association, organized an online conference in conjunction with the Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land.



The event on February 4, 2021, was titled "A Dialogue toward Peace, Harmony and Fraternity Confirmation."

The cooperation involved in setting up this webinar reflected the spirit of the day it celebrated. Commenting on the fact that this was the first joint initiative of the Al-Liqa' Center and the Universal Peace Federation, Bishop Mounib A. Younan stated, "We are showing in practice our human fraternity when we are having this webinar together."

Serving as the moderator, Dr. Tageldin Hamad, the vice president of UPF International, spoke about the new UN observance. On December 21, 2020, the UN General Assembly proclaimed February 4 as the International Day of Human Fraternity, to be observed each year beginning in 2021. This date was chosen because on February 4, 2019, His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb signed the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration.

Dr. Yousef Zaknoun, the director of the Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, gave some opening remarks. He summarized the work of the Al-Liqa' Center, which has promoted dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Palestine for over 35 years. The center promotes mutual

respect and combats racism and intolerance in their different forms.

Ethnic, denominational and political conflicts have erected boundaries between peoples, but the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the arbitrary nature of these barriers; the virus endangers all human communities, regardless of ethnic, religious, or political affiliation. Dr. Zaknoun expressed hope that this conference would lead to conversations and action to ease the suffering that the whole world endures at this moment.

Dr. Thomas Walsh, the chairman of UPF International, gave a brief description of the Universal Peace Federation's mission. UPF's commitment to interreligious dialogue goes back to its founders, who resolved to promote an interreligious council at the United Nations. This dialogue has many dimensions: dialogue within religions, dialogue between religions, and dialogue between the religious sphere and the secular sphere. Through these different dimensions of dialogue and collaboration, UPF seeks to promote its core aims of interdependence, mutual prosperity, and universal values.



### Panelists

The Rt. Rev. Munib A. Younan, the honorary president of Religions for Peace, highlighted some key points of the Abu Dhabi Declaration, whose signing he attended two years earlier. The document emphasizes the unity of humanity, global justice, and the need for lasting peace, he said. He laid out the arguments of Swiss theologian Hans Küng for common religious values: Peace on earth requires peace among religions, and peace among religions requires an emphasis on their common values.

Rev. Younan drew from the book of Genesis, emphasizing that God created us diverse, but with a common humanity. Our common values call on us to eliminate hatred and discrimination, he said.

The Abu Dhabi Declaration calls for equality for women; our societies will be deficient if women are not able to exercise their full human rights, he said. It also emphasizes equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities. We need a world that promotes justice, economic development and health for every human being, he said.

Dr. Mohamed Banat, a lecturer at the Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, reiterated the values of the Al-Liqa' Center and called on the audience to take the Abu Dhabi Declaration to heart. Religions must advocate a culture of tolerance and reconciliation, he said. But tolerance alone is not sufficient, because it must be accompanied by mutual respect.

Dr. Banat said he views Christians as an essential component of Arab and Palestinian society. Poverty and poor education play a key role in religious conflicts and the emergence of religious fundamentalism. He emphasized the importance of equal citizenship for members of different religions, as well as educational materials taught to students in schools: Christians and Muslims must be taught about each other. Understanding between the two groups can blunt long-standing resentments. Advocacy that emphasizes dialogue can promote peace and combat fundamentalism, he said.

Asmaa Kftarou of the Islamic Forum in Abu Dhabi reiterated Rev. Younan's words on the central importance of the rights of women. She recalled the meeting 20 years ago between Pope John Paul II and her grandfather Sheikh Ahmad Kftarou, the grand mufti of Syria. She praised the atmosphere of love,

tolerance, and respect in her home city of Abu Dhabi, where the meeting occurred.

As described in the Quran, Islam seeks to complete and validate the faiths that came before it, rather than destroy them, Mrs. Kftarou said. From this perspective, all humans are one family within the care of God. Much of the world lives under the shadow of war; in light of this, Mrs. Kftarou called for education that promotes peace and a culture that celebrates "peace heroes" rather than warriors and conquerors. She concluded with a prayer for love, respect, and peace.



Rev. Msgr. Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, former private secretary to His Holiness Pope Francis, said the world's faiths affirm rather than oppose the cultural and religious diversity of humankind. He remarked that education is one of the best ways to enlighten and transform society. No civilization has reached ascendancy without first focusing on education in order to improve. We must have faith that religion and science can complement one another rather than conflict.

Equally important is the family, where the seeds of knowledge and virtue are planted, he said. The values laid out in the Abu Dhabi Declaration can help bring about a world that celebrates human diversity, peace and justice. Rev. Msgr. Gaid also emphasized freedom as the right of all human beings, regardless of religion, gender, or nation. The document has the potential to lay the foundation for a better world, he said.

Judge Mohamed Abdelsalam, Secretary General of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, spoke of having witnessed the birth of the Human Fraternity Document: a document which had been one year in the making through the joint efforts of Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb and His Holiness Pope Francis was finally signed on 4th February 2019. This document, he told us "today has become the dream for all humanity. The world has chosen to take the path of human fraternity." He urged us to use this new-found recognition to move public opinion around the world towards acting on the values and principles in the document. "We at the Higher Committee on Human Fraternity will continue to work with you to transform this historic document into reality."

A question-and-answer session followed. On the role of women in countries where they are expected not to participate in the public sphere, Mrs. Kftarou called for the celebration of important women in religious history, and for an end to laws that enforce those expectations. Dr. Zaknoun reiterated the call for changes in laws that hold women out of the public sphere.

Dr. Banat emphasized a distinction between the culture of the home and the culture of the street. The home is more important – young people may hear ideas on the street, but what they experience in their family is the foundation for the way they understand the world.

An audience member then asked for some particular areas of focus for interreligious work. Rev. Younan emphasized the environment, education, and women's rights.

One viewer expressed her appreciation of the spirit of trust that permeated the whole event: "What made this event truly enjoyable was that each of these speakers brought this kind of trust in God toward each other and toward the viewers. It was not only immensely enjoyable, but it offered a standard which could be emulated across other interfaith events too." Referring to the fact that the event was held in English and Arabic, she added, "The fluid way the Arabic-English-Arabic worked was excellent too."