**International conference on religious extremism and violence in Africa**

Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations (HIPSIR)

The Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations (HIPSIR) held an international conference on ***Religious Extremism and Violence in Africa*** from October 9-10, 2018. The aim was to initiate dialogue among religious leaders, scholars, and social entrepreneurs on issues related of religious violence affecting the African continent today.

In previous conferences, HIPSIR focused on *Transitional Justice in Post Conflict Societies in Africa* in 2014 and *Extractive Industries in Africa: Addressing conflicts and Integrating Sustainable Development* in 2016*.* This time, the conference examined the strategies and responses applied to the problem of religious extremism and the ensuing violence in Africa.

Some questions considered during the conference were to learn whether the existing policies have been effective in curbing violent religious extremism. Also, from a political, security, economic, or socio-cultural perspective, the conference wanted to learn about the new challenges facing the continent in implementing such policies. To do so, it was important to agree on what conceptualization of religious extremism has been applied by policy makers and how they have operationalized it.

Adding an interdisciplinary approach to the debate, scholars in religious studies, Islamic studies, the social sciences, and Catholic theology debated together to create mutual understanding and a framework of interpretation of what constitutes religious extremism. This initiative was a culmination of many years of research, in collaboration with other institutions in Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia and Uganda in developing a curriculum for addressing religious extremism and violence in Africa. Six main issues were highlighted.

Firstly, the importance of hermeneutics and the role of the religious leaders in the reading and interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures. Religious leaders, including theologians, are trusted by their followers and play a central role in interpretation of Holy Scriptures together with shaping of narratives. As such, they can fan or de-escalate radicalization. Secondly, the industrialization and globalization phenomena have catalysed radicalization in Africa. New strategies of recruitment such as social media platforms are targeting new client base, namely children, women and girls, and educated youth from affluent families. Thirdly, socialization of youth is largely culturally or religiously monolithic. Such a socialization is problematic because it leads the youth to hold a rigid worldview singly informed by one single worldview. This attitude can inhibit accommodation of different cultural views and accentuate risk of dehumanizing the other. Fourthly, the place of women as victims of violent extremism began was contested. Besides being victims, women need to regain their full agency as human beings, and thus, recognize the role they play as active participants or perpetrators. Finally, the framing of violent conflicts especially in Africa as religious in nature needs be questioned. It was pointed out by many presenters and participants that religion was on many occasions used to canvas the real causes of conflicts. Hence, the conceptualization and theorizing of religious extremism and terrorism needs further research.