

Headline: Islam, faith, and climate change

Byline: Noor Al Hussein

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AMMAN—The Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, endorsed in August by Islamic scholars from around the world, calls on countries to phase out greenhouse-gas emissions and switch to 100-percent renewable energy. With 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, the collective statement sent a strong signal days before the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit was held last Sept. 25-27, and ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris to be held come December.

Released during a two-day symposium on Islam and climate change in Istanbul, the declaration explains why Muslims should be responsible activists for the welfare of the planet, and sets out a series of demands to world leaders and the business community.

First, the declaration calls on policymakers responsible for crafting the comprehensive climate agreement to be adopted in Paris to come to “an equitable and binding conclusion.” The agreement should set clear targets and establish ways to monitor them. Additionally, prosperous countries and oil-producing states should phase out their carbon-dioxide emissions no later than the middle of the century; turn away from “unethical profit from the environment”; and invest in a green economy.

Second, the declaration asks people and leaders from all countries to commit to 100-percent renewable energy and a zero-emissions strategy as soon as possible, and to recognize that unlimited economic growth is not a viable option. Moreover, adaptation should be a high priority, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. Notably, the business sector is asked to take a more active role to reduce its carbon footprint, commit to 100-percent renewable energy and zero emissions, shift investments into renewable energy, adopt more sustainable business models, and assist in the divestment from fossil fuels.

Finally, the declaration issues an appeal to “all Muslims wherever they may be” that is underpinned by quotes from the Holy Koran. Care for creation is a fundamental part of the Islamic message, the declaration notes, and humans are currently responsible for squandering gifts bestowed by Allah.

The Koranic ayah 24:45 tells us how Allah created every living creature from water, and the Hadith instructs us that we are “stewards of the Earth”:

“The Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole Earth has been created a place of worship, pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded. If a Muslim plants a tree or sowed a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is love on his part.”

This message echoes and affirms examples found in the doctrines of many faiths, which call on us to be kinder and wiser in how we use this planet, and to advocate for all creatures. As the Buddhist Za Choeje Rinpoche, the sixth incarnation of ZaChoeje Rinpoche, teaches:

“By injuring any part of the world’s system, you injure yourself. Think of life on this planet in terms of systems and not detached elements. See that the environment does not belong to any single country to exploit and then disregard.”

The Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, like Pope Francis' recent encyclical "Laudato Si," is a call to humanity, regardless of faith, to work together to protect the planet upon which we depend. I hope that they will indeed provide an impetus for shifts in policies, allowing for deeper and broader reductions in CO2 emissions.

These statements of faith are both historic and timely, as the world's countries seek to implement global agreements in areas ranging from climate change to Sustainable Development Goals, to the establishment of marine reserves on the high seas. Indeed, it is important to remember that the earth's surface is primarily ocean, which plays a critical role as both a carbon sink and a regulator of the climate. The oceans annually absorb approximately 25 percent of all human-caused CO2 emissions, and we are now overtaxing this capacity.

The carbon dissolved in the ocean has altered its chemistry, driving up acidity by 30 percent since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The ocean's health is now largely dependent upon lowering CO2 emissions within the next few decades, before runaway ocean acidification occurs and sea levels change radically.

As an "Ocean Elder," I was also heartened by Francis' emphasis in "Laudato Si" on the need for strict mechanisms of regulation and control on the open seas—a real step forward in this regard. The high seas are the earth's last great global commons, representing nearly 50 percent of the planet's surface, and the multiple threats they face require universal solidarity and action.

Just this past June, UN member-states unanimously supported a General Assembly resolution to negotiate a new international agreement to protect marine life in the high seas. Restoring and regenerating the abundance and diversity of species across one of our planet's critical life-support systems are essential to building the entire planet's resilience in the face of climate change.

Many have pointed out that we are the first generation to have hard evidence of the enormous damage that humanity is causing to natural ecosystems, and probably the last that can truly do something about it. Now is the critical time for multilateralism, multifaith dialogues and, perhaps the most important, active engagement.

We are all humans who live on and off Earth. We have all been entrusted to care for the planet. We can and must do this by forging bold climate and protective ocean agreements together—regardless of belief, circumstance or status. Science tells us we have to act; our faith and humanity compel us to do so. Project Syndicate

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Noor Al Hussein is queen of Jordan and an "Ocean Elder."