

A call for dialogue in times of conflicts

In the current global context, we are facing an alarming erosion of the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Civilians, hospitals, and humanitarian workers—who should be protected under international law—are becoming more and more targets in armed conflicts. The rules that once preserved a minimum of humanity even in war are now being disregarded with dramatic frequency after the world wars.

We are witnessing an unprecedented crisis of respect for humanitarian norms. From Gaza to Ukraine, from Sudan to Yemen, entire populations are paying the price of wars fought without distinction, without limits. The neutrality of humanitarian workers is no longer guaranteed, and the "holy" spaces meant to save lives—ambulances, clinics, hospitals—are often turned into battlefields and targets of military action. This cannot be accepted as the new normal.

In this dramatic and complex scenario, it is worth recalling a remarkable initiative that represented a light of hope held in 2015: an historic high-level Conference, I personally attended, which gave birth to the Declaration on the Culture of Humanitarian Dialogue. The Conference, conceived and organised by Dr. Ali Awad, was a visionary initiative that brought together religious leaders, diplomats, academics, and representatives of civil society, all united by the belief that dialogue is essential to building peace.

Held in Geneva—a city that has always symbolised diplomacy and humanitarian values—the Conference took place at a time marked by war, humanitarian emergencies, and the spread of extremism. Its objective was clear: to provide an answer through dialogue and human dignity.

The initiative aimed to:

Promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue as a fundamental tool to prevent conflicts and foster coexistence.

Affirm the centrality of human rights and human dignity, as the foundations of peace and stability.

Encourage international cooperation based on inclusive, participatory approaches to deal with humanitarian challenges.

The Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference outlined several guiding principles which remain highly relevant today:

Rejection of violence: All forms of violence and terrorism were firmly condemned, with a call to address the root causes of conflict such as injustice, discrimination, and marginalisation.

Education for dialogue: The Declaration underlined the importance of educational programmes that promote respect, listening, and cultural understanding, especially among young people.

Inclusive participation: All segments of society—including minorities and vulnerable groups—must be involved in decision-making processes to ensure sustainable solutions.

Global solidarity: The signatories committed to working together to respond to humanitarian crises and to guarantee protection and assistance to all in need, without discrimination.

The spirit of the 2015 Declaration did not remain confined to words. It inspired concrete action and meaningful cooperation among international actors.

One notable example is the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation, established in Geneva in 2016 thanks to the collaboration between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

This centre offers a platform for the exchange of experiences and training in humanitarian negotiations, helping professionals navigate complex crises while remaining faithful to humanitarian principles. It is a direct continuation of the ideas set forth during the Geneva Conference, showing that dialogue is not only a value—it is a method, a tool, and a path forward.

Today more than ever, in a world marked by conflict and polarisation, the culture of dialogue must be defended and strengthened. The work of Dr. Ali Awad, who has dedicated his life to promoting peace, understanding, and humanitarian values, remains an example for all those engaged in humanitarian action.

His vision, expressed in the 2015 Geneva Declaration, reminds us that true peace is not built with weapons, but with words, listening, and mutual respect. It is our duty to carry this message forward, especially when the silence of diplomacy is drowned out by the noise of war.

Massimo Barra