

# **Religious leaders in Arab nations launch AIDS response group: Network of Muslims and Christians collaborate**

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More than 300 religious leaders have signed up to form a new network of Muslim and Christian groups from 20 Arab countries, responding as a “united force” to the mounting prevalence of HIV/AIDS in their region.

The First Network of Arab Religious Leaders Responding to AIDS was launched in Cairo on November 9 under the acronym CHAHAMA.

“We have developed a plan of action to urgently respond to what is amounting to a region living on the brink of an epidemic,” said Hady Aya, an Antonin Maronite cleric and founder of the Organization for Justice and Mercy in Lebanon.

UN figures show that Arab countries have one of the fastest growing HIV infection rates in the world due to heightened risk factors stemming from armed conflict, gender disparity and poverty. According to the UN data, every 10 minutes someone is infected with HIV in Arab states, and women now make up half of those infected.

“The motto for CHAHAMA is ‘Religions in the Service of Humanity.’” stated Lina El Hemsy, a lecturer at the Kaftaro Islamic Center in Damascus.

World Bank projections for infection rates in the Arab region foresee generalized epidemics in the next 10 years if the response is not scaled up immediately.

“We created CHAHAMA [because of] the great responsibility that has been placed in our hands to reach out to the communities we serve,” asserted Aya.

The CHAHAMA pact commits religious leaders in the Arab states to expand their membership, promote chastity and dignity among men and women and plan

strategies to reach the most vulnerable groups in society. It will also seek to provide support, spiritual counseling and care for people living with HIV and their families.

The group said it also will address the root causes of the spread of HIV/AIDS, including poverty. *-Ecumenical News International*