

# SEVENTH MEETING OF THE ISTANBUL PROCESS

**Combatting religious intolerance:  
Building inclusive and resilient societies, and pushing  
back against incitement to hatred and violence**

**18-19 November 2019  
The Hague, The Netherlands**



# INTRODUCTION

On 18-19 November 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands with the support of the Universal Rights Group (URG) hosted the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process. The meeting was entitled, ‘Combatting religious intolerance: building inclusive and resilient societies, and pushing back against incitement to hatred and violence.’

This was the first Istanbul Process meeting to be held after a hiatus of three years. The previous full meeting of the Process was held in Singapore in 2016. Earlier in 2019, Denmark and the European Union (EU), with the support of URG, convened a ‘stocktaking meeting’ in Geneva to reflect on the first six meetings of the Istanbul Process, and revitalise international efforts to combat religious intolerance.

The seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process sought to continue the practitioner-centric approach established at the sixth meeting in Singapore. It provided a platform for practitioners from a cross-regional group of States, as well as other relevant stakeholders, to share practical policy experiences, good practices and lessons learnt in the promotion of religious tolerance and strengthened resilience, in the spirit of the action plan set down in Human Rights Council resolution 16/18.

Participants included government officials, law enforcement officers, religious leaders, community leaders, museum directors, representatives of professional football clubs, academics, human rights civil society representatives, and - for this first time at an Istanbul Process meeting – representatives of the private sector (especially social media companies). The meeting enjoyed participation from all UN regions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the West.

After a high-level opening plenary, featuring a keynote address by H.E. Mr Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, participants were divided between four breakout groups for more in-depth discussions. This format was designed to allow for greater interaction and practical exchange between different stakeholders from different regions.

The breakout discussions addressed two main themes and four subthemes. The aim was to cover all parts of the UN action plan on combatting religious intolerance, as set down in Council resolution 16/18. The key themes and subthemes were:

1. ‘Pro-active approach: building tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies’

a. Building tolerant and inclusive societies through inter-religious dialogue, social integration and education (paragraphs 5a, and 5h of the 16/18 action plan) (break-out group 1).  
b. Preventing negative stereotyping and discrimination in areas such as health, housing, education and employment, including through training of government officials, promoting dialogue with and within communities, awareness-building and media education (paragraphs 5c, 5d, and 5g of the 16/18 action plan) (break-out group 2).
2. ‘Incitement to religious hatred and violence: pushing back’

a. Implementation of paragraphs 5e and 5f of resolution 16/18, and the Rabat Plan of Action (paragraphs 5e, and 5f of the 16/18 action plan) (break-out group 3).  
b. Working with the media and social media companies (paragraphs 5a, and 5g of the 16/18 action plan) (break-out group 4).

The gathering in The Hague also included (again a first for a meeting of the Istanbul Process) a gender session and a ‘marketplace’ where different organisations (including government agencies, police forces, museums, professional football clubs, NGOs and faith-based organisations, mainly - but not only - from The Netherlands), presented innovative projects designed to help combat religious intolerance, discrimination, stigmatisation, incitement to hatred and violence, and violence. The aim of the marketplace was to showcase practical case studies and good practices using interactive displays. It also strengthened the principle of ‘introspection’ in the Istanbul Process – i.e. the idea that participating States (especially hosts) should use meetings as an opportunity to reflect on their own challenges, as opposed to commenting on those of others.

A final ‘reporting back’ plenary session then provided a platform for all participants to hear back from the four breakout groups, especially in terms of interesting case studies and practical examples of national/local progress in line with the ‘16/18 action plan,’ and to engage in further discussions and debate. Participants were actively encouraged to think about how to replicate interesting or good practices in their own national or local contexts.

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# PART I

## BACKGROUND

The main intergovernmental policy framework for combatting religious intolerance against persons based on religion or belief is set down in Human Rights Council (Council) resolution 16/18 and its sister text at the General Assembly (GA) – resolution 66/167. Resolutions 16/18 and 66/167 were adopted by consensus in 2011 and hailed by stakeholders from all regions and faiths as an important step forward. After 65 years of often-difficult debate and negotiation at the UN (during which time one of the few examples of tangible progress was the adoption of the 1981 Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief), the twin resolutions elaborated the first and only universally accepted global policy framework for preventing and combatting intolerance, discrimination, stigmatisation, incitement to violence and violence, on the basis of religion or belief.

The inclusion of an explicit plan of action to combat religious intolerance in the operative paragraphs of the twin resolutions (as well as in later iterations of the texts) is key to understanding their value and importance. What is more, States had the foresight to also put in place a dedicated mechanism of implementation for the action plan: the ‘Istanbul Process.’ Since the launch of the Process in Turkey in July 2011, there have been six expert-level meetings: in Washington DC (US), London (UK and Canada), Geneva (OIC), Doha (Qatar), Jeddah (OIC), and Singapore. Moreover, in April 2019, Denmark and the EU organised a ‘stock taking’ exercise in Geneva to discuss progress over the course of the first six meetings of the Process.

More than eight years after the adoption of resolution 16/18 and against a worrying backdrop of heightened religious intolerance worldwide (e.g. recent events in Pittsburgh, Christchurch and Colombo), and with relevant issues and debates (e.g. addressing incitement to hatred and violence, including online) never far from newspaper headlines, driving further progress with the implementation of the plan of action originally set down in Council resolution 16/18 (hereinafter ‘the 16/18 action plan’) remains important.

### Sixth meeting of the Istanbul Process

The sixth meeting of the Istanbul Process, held in Singapore in July 2016, offered an opportunity to bring the Process back to its founding ideals: namely to provide a space for practitioner-led exchanges of good practices, challenges and lessons learnt in the implementation of the 16/18 action plan. The Singapore meeting was also symbolically important because it was the first meeting hosted by a non-Western/non-OIC State. A report of the sixth meeting of the Istanbul Process can be accessed [here](#).

### Istanbul Process ‘stock-taking’ meeting

In April 2019, the Danish Mission to the UN Office at Geneva, the EU Delegation to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva and URG, organised an Istanbul Process ‘stocktaking exercise.’ The meeting sought to, *inter alia*:

- Inform States and other interested stakeholders about the background of the UN’s efforts to combat religious intolerance and promote freedom of religion or belief, the action plan set down in resolutions 16/18 and 66/167, and the Istanbul Process.
- Consider the current status of the Istanbul Process – opportunities and challenges.
- Look back on the sixth meeting of the Process, as well as on earlier meetings, and reflect on lessons learnt.
- Consider a number of case studies where States have brought changes in line with the 16/18-action plan.

During the meeting, participants encouraged all States to consider hosting future meetings of the Istanbul Process, and called for those meetings to emphasise introspection and self-reflection, implementation and impact, and the practical exchange of ideas and experience. Potential hosts were also urged to ensure that future meetings of the Istanbul Process are as inclusive as possible, with the broad participation of States from all regions, civil society, relevant UN officials and experts, religious leaders, business representatives and journalists.





## PART II

# SEVENTH MEETING OF THE ISTANBUL PROCESS

### Opening session

The inaugural address of the meeting was delivered by H.E. Mr Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. A number of high-level speakers also delivered remarks during the opening session, including: H.E. Mr Shafqat Mahmood, Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training, Islamic Republic of Pakistan; H.E. Ms Kate Gilmore, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights; as well as H.E. Mr Carlos Mario Foradori, Vice President of the Human Rights Council; Ms Karen Smith, in her capacity as a representative for the UN Secretary-General, especially in the context of his 'Strategy and action plan against hate speech'; H.E. Ambassador Nassima Baghli, OIC Permanent Observer to the UN Office in

Geneva; Ambassador Mohammad Alami Musa, Chairperson of the Islamic Religious Council, Republic of Singapore; and Ms Felice Gear, Executive Director, Jacob Blaustein Institute. Additionally, the opening session featured a high-level panel discussion on 'Looking forward: building momentum,' moderated by H.E. Mr Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief of the Netherlands, and overall chair of the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process.

This section provides a short, non-exhaustive summary of some of the key points made during the session.



### H.E. MR STEF BLOK, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS

In his keynote address, Mr Blok recalled the terrible events of 15 March 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand, when an armed man attacked two Mosques during Friday prayers, killing 51 worshippers and injuring a further 49. Those attacks, together with other, similar tragedies in Colombo, Halle, Kabul and elsewhere during the course of 2019, reveal the persistence and the scale of the global problem of intolerance, discrimination, stigmatisation, incitement to violence and violence, based on religion or belief. Over the past year 'synagogues have been defaced with Swastikas, Muslims have been targeted, Christians have been killed, and atheists have faced the death penalty,' said the Foreign Minister. The international community must push back against this rising tide of hate. In doing so, said Mr Blok, we should draw inspiration from people like Mr Farid Ahmed, senior Islamic community leader in Christchurch (who participated in The Hague meeting), who, despite losing his wife in the attacks, chose to respond to hatred and violence with love and respect. Moreover, 'we need to learn from each other and share our thinking in order to ensure that people are not subject to violence because of their faith or their lack of faith.' Fortunately, in the '16/18 action plan' and the Istanbul Process, the international community has the tools it needs to launch such a concerted global push back, to share information and experiences on which laws and policies work, and which do not, to promote inclusion and understanding, and to finally consign anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of religious intolerance to the history books.

That is why, according to Mr Blok, the Netherlands supports resolution 16/18, and why he responded positively to the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed's suggestion to host the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process.

The Dutch Foreign Minister also explained that if the world is to win this fight, all parts of society must be mobilised, not only governments, and that all must play their part. That includes domestic civil society and 'grass roots organisations.' In this regard, he shared the story of Said Benssalam and Rabi Lody B. van de Kamp from Amsterdam, a Muslim and a Jew, who, after Mr Benssalam witnessed an anti-Semitic gesture against the Rabi, decided to work together to promote tolerance and understanding between people of different faiths.

Lastly, Mr. Blok explained the value of international human rights law in providing a guidance framework for governments and societies to tackle religious discrimination and incitement to hatred in an effective and sustainable manner. One key question in that regard, and one of the topics under discussion in The Hague, is how to fully respect and protect freedom of expression while addressing incitement and hate speech. There is an important boundary between permissible and non-permissible expression, a boundary that can be difficult to discern and that may shift depending on national context and culture. The international human rights conventions, UN human rights mechanisms (e.g. the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression), and soft law instruments like resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, are perfectly placed to help States identify that boundary, and develop laws and policies that address the growing problem of hate speech, especially on line, while respecting all fundamental human rights and freedoms.

In conclusion, Mr Blok shared the story of Father Frans, a Dutch priest killed during Syria's terrible (ongoing) civil war. His mission in Syria had been to build bridges of mutual understanding between different religious communities. Mr Blok called on all participants to be inspired by the example of Father Frans and, over the two-day Istanbul Process meeting, to: 'build bridges, exchange ideas, and enter into conversations.'



## RESPONSE TO THE CHRISTCHURCH ATTACKS

On 15 March 2019, two consecutive terrorist attacks occurred at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, during Friday Prayers. The attacks began at the Al Noor Mosque in the suburb of Riccarton and continued at the Linwood Islamic Centre. The gunman live-streamed the first attack on Facebook. The attacks killed 51 people and injured 49. The New Zealand Government's response to the tragedy was widely praised for its honesty, its sensitivity and empathy *vis-à-vis* the victims, and its avoidance of inflaming further religious or racial tensions. After the attack, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern swiftly labelled the attacks as an act of 'terrorism' (thus responding to the sense amongst Muslims that such attacks are only called as such when they are perpetrated in the name of Islam), and called an Australian parliamentarian's suggestion of a link between Muslim immigration and such violence 'a disgrace.' Importantly, in a speech after the attacks, she said of the victims and the wider Muslim community in Christchurch that 'They are us.' The next day she visited the victims in Christchurch. Dressed in black and wearing a headscarf as a sign of respect, she told them that the whole country was 'united in grief.'

Ardern also made a point of never saying the terrorist's name, which jolted media outlets into following suit. This was important to focus on the victims of the attacks and not on the person who took their lives, which would have given him the notoriety he sought. Finally, against a background whereby

the attacker had published his 'manifesto' online and had live-streamed the attack on Facebook; the Prime Minister chose not to respond with the usual (Western) statements in defence of freedom of expression, nor to oversteer towards regulatory restrictions on freedom of expression online, but rather acknowledged the nature and scale of the problem of terrorist and violent extremist content designed to go viral online, and reached out to governments of partner countries, as well as Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Amazon and other online service providers, to discuss a joint initiative to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online. The result was the 'Christchurch Call to Action.'

The Prime Minister was not alone in responding to the attacks by seeking to bring people together rather than push them further apart. Farid Ahmed and his wife Husna were praying in their mosque when the gunman stormed in and opened fire. Husna hurried the women and children to safety and was shot dead as she ran back into the mosque to help her husband who uses a wheelchair. Miraculously, Farid survived. Days later he bravely told the press that he had forgiven the man who killed his wife and so many of his friends. Like the words of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, his words of love and peace went viral, thereby helping to focus attention on uniting the community and supporting the victims.



**H.E. MR SHAFQAT MAHMOOD, MINISTER FOR FEDERAL EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN**

Mr Mahmood began by thanking the Netherlands for the moral and political leadership it had shown in deciding to convene the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process. There is no more important challenge for the international community, he said, than effectively tackling religious discrimination, intolerance and hate speech; and the Istanbul Process must necessarily form a central pillar of that effort.

The Minister expressed Pakistan's hope that the seventh meeting would mark a further step forward for what appears to be a

growing international determination to work together, through dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding, to tackle the issue of incitement to hatred or violence based on religion or belief. In that regard, the Minister welcomed ongoing work on the implementation of the Rabat Plan of Action, the adoption of a UN strategy to combat hate speech, the EU's new code of conduct to combat online hate speech (developed in partnership with social media companies), and national initiatives in France and Germany.

These steps, and the holding of the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process, could not come at a more important time – against a backdrop of an apparent rise in hatred and violence against people because of their religion or beliefs. Echoing the views of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Mr Mahmood decried the fact that incidences of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, attacks against Christians and other forms of intolerance, are never far from today's front pages. In some cases, this rising wave of hate has resulted in mass killings of worshippers in mosques, churches and synagogues.

Mr Mahmood recognised the difficulties inherent in tackling hate speech while also respecting freedom of expression and opinion. However, he said, he sensed a new willingness among States to try to understand each other's views on this matter, and come together to identify and implement workable policies. The meeting in The Hague would be an important opportunity to share information on those evolving policies.

In this spirit of practical exchange, the Minister presented some concrete examples of policies and projects designed to combat intolerance and build inter-religious understanding in Pakistan.



Over recent years, Pakistan has, for example, reformed its school curriculum to remove any divisive or hateful content, encourage religious literacy, and promote human rights education; has strengthened protection around all religious sites; and recently opened the 'Kartarpur corridor' for Sikh pilgrims residing in neighbouring countries.

The Minister then offered a few thoughts on key challenges and next steps. In Pakistan's view, to effectively tackle intolerance and 'populism,' governments would need to: develop 'bottom up' approaches to tolerance and non-discrimination that address the root causes of hatred (e.g. through education policies, housing policies, and inter-religious dialogue); 'find the right balance between freedom of expression and the freedom to offend'; 'create an international legal framework to counter hate speech online and offline'; and 'tackle the root causes of inequality and social stigmatisation.'

Mr Mahmood ended by announcing Pakistan's willingness to host the eighth meeting of the Istanbul Process in late 2020 or during 2021.

**H.E. MS KATE GILMORE, DEPUTY UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, ON BEHALF OF THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, MS MICHELLE BACHELET**

Echoing the words of the Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, Ms Gilmore also began by paying tribute to the victims of recent attacks against places of worship in New Zealand, Sri Lanka and Germany. The attacks, she said, should act as a rallying cry for a 'firmer, more united, global effort' to tackle 'more comprehensively, more effectively, and more inclusively, violence on the basis of religion or belief.' She noted that while 'these acts target some, they assault us all.'

Notwithstanding the gravity of such acts, they represent only the 'tip of the iceberg' of global religious intolerance. Largely hidden beneath the surface are countless smaller acts of hatred that create division, undermine human dignity and erode societal cohesion. What is more, those acts usually target those in society who are already in the most vulnerable situations.

Ms Gilmore praised the Istanbul Process as the international community's primary framework for responding to all such acts of intolerance, including at root cause level. She said the Process is a prime example of the Council's capacity for 'creative problem-solving' and for 'cross-regional cooperation.' The Istanbul Process 'is not only the first inter-governmental follow-up mechanism established for a Council resolution,' it also pioneered the idea of 'bringing debates and decisions in Geneva to regional, national and local levels.'

Unfortunately, however, the enormous potential of the Process is not fully tapped, largely because of the irregularity of its meetings, the different approaches taken by the hosts, and inconsistent outcomes. The Deputy High Commissioner therefore 'welcomed the orientation and focus of the seventh meeting on:

'implementation not debate, on what works, not on what we know doesn't; on inclusive exchange with civil society; and on agreeing a practical roadmap to build and maintain momentum.' At a procedural level, this should include steps to give a stronger role to and 'empower past, present and future chairs.' She noted that OHCHR and the UN human rights mechanisms stand ready to assist in these efforts.

In conclusion, the Deputy High Commissioner reflected on the central place of religion or belief in the lives of billions of people around the world. However, as well as bringing a sense of meaning to the lives of those people, religion or belief also entail responsibilities for believers everywhere – to behave unto others

as they would wish to be treated themselves. In this regard, it is important to understand that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights anticipates pluralistic societies where multiple religions or beliefs can peacefully co-exist. Taking its lead from this vision, international human rights law 'seeks to protect the believer not the belief.' International law is also based on the notion that all rights and freedoms are inter-related and mutually-reinforcing. Freedom of expression does not exist in tension with freedom of religion, for example. Rather, they reinforce each other. And neither should be used as an excuse to violate people's rights to freedom from want and freedom from fear. All rights are, on the contrary, indivisible.



**H.E. MR CARLOS MARIO FORADORI,  
VICE PRESIDENT OF THE HUMAN  
RIGHTS COUNCIL, AND PERMANENT  
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ARGENTINE  
REPUBLIC TO THE UN AND OTHER  
INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN  
GENEVA**

The Vice President of the Human Rights Council also emphasised the inter-relatedness and mutually reinforcing nature of all human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression and opinion. This is fully reflected in resolution 16/18 and its action plan, which helps explain its enduring importance as the basis of international action to address discrimination, hatred and violence based on religion or belief. Today, that action plan and its process of implementation are more important than ever. States must redouble their efforts to drive forward progress on this, one of the defining human rights issues of our time.

When reading resolution 16/18, it is clear that the drafters understood not only the interrelatedness of human rights, but also the need for a holistic strategy covering legislative and non-legislative steps, and covering all relevant stakeholders, including States, religious leaders, and civil society. It is also clear from the resolution that the basis of progress to tackle religious discrimination and intolerance must be international cooperation

and dialogue, leading to real, practical change on the ground. That, indeed, is the founding premise of the Istanbul Process – to provide a space for dialogue and cooperation, and a space where States and other stakeholders can share practical experiences and policies, and can learn from each other. All of this makes the Istanbul Process 'truly unique.'

Finally, Mr Foradori spoke of the important contribution the UN human rights mechanisms, including Special Procedures, Treaty Bodies and the UPR, can and do make to international efforts to combat religious intolerance – both inside and outside the framework of the Istanbul Process. Building societal resilience against shocks such as religious hatred and violence, by promoting States' implementation of their international human rights obligations and commitments, is the 'daily work' of those mechanisms.



**MS KAREN SMITH, IN HER CAPACITY AS A  
REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE UN SECRETARY-  
GENERAL'S STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN  
AGAINST HATE SPEECH**

Echoing previous remarks, Ms Smith relayed Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' deep concern at increasing anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic and anti-Christian attacks around the world. Moreover, other religions are not immune – witness acts of intolerance by or against Hindus and Buddhists, for example. These trends are a direct affront to the principles of common humanity, dignity, diversity and respect upon which the United Nations was founded.

She also repeated a point made by many others: high profile attacks against worshipers in places like Christchurch and Colombo are not isolated incidents, but rather are merely the most extreme manifestation of rising religious hatred and intolerance around the world. Every day, and in every country in the world, smaller scale but terribly damaging acts of hatred go unreported. Exclusion from job markets, discrimination in access to education and healthcare, and the steady drip-feed of hateful comments in the streets: such acts of intolerance based on religion or belief are the giant underbelly of those large-scale acts of violence that make it onto our TV screens. Linked with this point, she pointed out that genocide does not just happen – it starts with words, with hate speech, which serves to discriminate, stigmatise and dehumanise certain groups in society based on their religion or belief, or based on other characteristics such as ethnicity or race.

With these points in mind, in 2019 the UN Secretary-General launched a new Plan of action on hate speech. The Plan is built around two key elements. First, to address root causes and the drivers of hate speech. This is also inextricably linked to the Secretary-General's prevention agenda. Second, to ensure an effective UN response to mitigate the impacts of hate speech on society. With these elements in mind, the Plan proposes 13 commitments for action, based on certain key principles. One of those is that all national policies to combat hate speech must be grounded in international human rights law, including the obligation to respect and protect freedom of expression. Another is that national action should not only focus on prohibition but also on promoting positive messages of inclusion, mutual understanding and mutual respect. As part of that, the Secretary-General has emphasised the importance of education, and recently called for 'a global inter-ministerial conference on the role of education to tackle hate speech.'

Finally, Ms Smith highlighted the importance of the Fez Plan of Action and the positive role that faith actors can play by speaking out against and raising the alarm about words and acts of intolerance, and – in a more positive sense – in promoting messages of peace and understanding within and between their communities.





**H.E. MS NASSIMA BAGHLI, AMBASSADOR,  
PERMANENT OBSERVER OF THE  
ORGANISATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION  
(OIC) TO THE UN OFFICE IN GENEVA,  
READING A MESSAGE FROM H.E. DR YOUSEF  
AL OTHAIMEEN, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF  
THE OIC**

Ambassador Baghli added the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's voice to those expressing concern at rising incidences of religious discrimination, intolerance, stigmatisation and violence around the world. This makes the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process, and real-world progress with the implementation of the 16/18 action plan, extremely important, she noted. What is more, there is a direct line between religious discrimination and intolerance, radicalisation, and violent terrorism. Such phenomena are best addressed at root-cause level, which means all UN member States must make progress with the implementation of resolution 16/18.

The increase in discrimination, intolerance, stigmatisation and violence based on religion or belief is tied, in many parts of the world, to the rise of populist politicians. Under resolution 16/18, politicians and other public figures are expected to speak out against intolerance; yet the contemporary reality is many are stoking fears and prejudices about 'the other' to strengthen their political support base. In some cases, leaders are using the idea of a 'clash of civilisations' between adherents of the world's great religions, as an excuse for blatantly discriminatory policies and laws.

In addition to politicians, Ambassador Baghli also spoke of the responsibilities of journalists and the media. Again, this is both a 'negative' responsibility – to avoid propagating stereotypes or language that might incite hatred or violence; and a 'positive' responsibility – to promote understanding between faiths and to reflect positive as well as negative stories. The Ambassador noted that the OIC 'is not against freedom of expression.' But that freedom should not be used by one group of people to incite hatred and violence against another group of people. With rights come responsibilities, and, linked with that point, the best way to prevent acts of violence based on religion or belief, is to address root causes by addressing the daily acts of discrimination and hate speech that serve to create divisions in society. For that reason, the OIC strongly supports the approach taken in the UN Secretary-General's Plan of action on hate speech.

Finally, Ambassador Baghli repeated the OIC's call for the establishment of an 'observatory' to monitor acts or religious hatred and incidences of hate speech.



**H.E. MR EAMON GILMORE, EU SPECIAL  
REPRESENTATIVE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS<sup>1</sup>**

Mr Gilmore reflected on the fact that the events of 2019 show us, once again, that hatred towards, and the persecution of, people because of their religious beliefs has not, sadly, been consigned to the history books. Instead, believers and non-believers around the world remain the targets of abuse, discrimination and violence because of their faith, because their beliefs change, or because they do not adhere to any religion.

Mr Gilmore, like many before him, argued that the best strategy to confront religious hatred and violence is a holistic one – focused on addressing the full range of root causes. In particular, that means States must respect, promote and protect all human rights, without discrimination on any grounds, including religion or belief. That means building inclusive societies. In that regard, the EU recently launched a 'Global exchange on religion in society' initiative, which recognises the importance of faith and faith actors in society, and seeks to promote peaceful coexistence between people of different faiths, as well as inter-religious dialogue and understanding. The ultimate aim of the platform is to build more resilient societies. Linked with this point, Mr Gilmore said that any successful strategy must also, by definition, be multi-stakeholder. Governments, civil society and – crucially – religious community leaders must all work together. As an example of the power and

influence of religious leaders, Mr Gilmore referenced the role of the Church in the Colombia peace process.

On the particular issue of hate speech, especially online, the EU Special Representative recognised that EU member States still have a long way to go to effectively deal with the problem – in a manner that also respects freedom of expression. That said, the European Commission, in cooperation with social media companies, is taking steps to systematise the 'take down' of hateful content, while a number of member States, such as France and Germany, have taken legislative steps to tackle intolerance, by preventing the spread of online content that incites hatred or violence. Mr Gilmore also spoke of the power of 'positive speech,' especially on the part of politicians and religious leaders, as an important antidote to 'hate speech.'



**H.E. AMBASSADOR MOHAMMAD ALAMI  
MUSA, CHAIRPERSON OF THE ISLAMIC  
RELIGIOUS COUNCIL, REPUBLIC OF  
SINGAPORE**

In his statement on behalf of the outgoing chair of the Istanbul Process, Singapore, Ambassador Musa also argued for an approach that addresses root causes, and thereby prevents incidences of religious intolerance and violence from happening in the first place. In particular, he said, this calls for a strong role for the State, to promote (through policy and legislative means) inclusion and non-discrimination across all parts of society. For example, in Singapore, all ethnic and religious groups have access to new public housing developments, while school classrooms similarly reflect the full diversity of Singaporean society. As well as promoting inclusion, these and other steps also help avoid 'ghettoization' – and instead ensure that members of different religious and ethnic groups become familiar with one another, and understand each other's backgrounds, culture and beliefs. The State should play an important role in promoting such an inclusive society, but it cannot do it alone. Rather, the Government works

closely with religious community leaders, with museums, and with civil society, to promote tolerance and understanding, and avoid intercommunal tension and violence.

As an example of a 'hard law' aspect of this strategy, the Ambassador spoke of Singapore's 'Religious harmony law,' adopted 30 years ago. He explained that this acts as a strong deterrent to hate speech and incitement to violence, which Singapore believes jeopardises the rights and security of others in society. Regarding soft law and policy provisions, he described Singapore's web of 'inter-religious networks.' In addition to promoting inter-religious dialogue and understanding on an ongoing basis, these networks have an early warning/early response function: helping society respond rapidly to any emerging tensions between religious communities, encouraging dialogue and introducing 'cooling off' periods.

1. Mr Gilmore's message was delivered by H.E. Mr. Markus Leinonen, Ambassador and EU Liaison Officer to The Hague, European Union, member of the European External Action Service (EEAS).



**MS FELICE GAER, DIRECTOR OF AJC'S  
JACOB BLAUSTEIN INSTITUTE FOR THE  
ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS,  
UNITED STATES**

Ms Gaer spoke of the importance of the international human rights mechanisms in holding governments to account against their international human rights obligations, including with respect to the right to freedom of religion or belief. She remarked that those mechanisms have driven remarkable human rights progress over recent decades. In particular, she referred to the work of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, including his important recent report on anti-Semitism.

Referencing Eleanor Roosevelt's famous quote that 'human rights violations take place in small places close to home,' Ms Gaer argued that these are then the places where the international human rights community needs to focus its efforts – i.e. at ground- or root cause-level. This, in turn, explains the value of the Istanbul Process, a practitioner-level initiative that offers space for governments, UN experts, religious leaders and civil society to exchange good practice and lessons learnt, and thus to identify those policies, laws and practices that actually work to prevent religious intolerance and discrimination in those 'small places close to home.'

Civil society must be an integral part of such an initiative if it is to work. Civil society is uniquely placed to know and understand the 'small places close to home,' for the simple reason they are part of and can engage directly with their local communities. This proximity brings invaluable knowledge, expertise and experience, which can and should be shared via platforms such as the Istanbul Process. As one example, Ms Gaer spoke of the Muslim and Jewish Advisory Council in the US, which engages directly with local religious communities to promote dialogue and support

human rights. In particular, Ms Gaer, while welcoming the fact that more civil society organisations had been invited to the meeting in The Hague than had been the case for previous meetings, called for local NGOs with local knowledge, and local experience of what works and what doesn't, to be invited. Such NGOs can also provide expert updates about the actions of governments, for example in fulfilling their human rights obligations, in protecting religious minority groups, or repealing blasphemy laws. Ms Gaer urged future hosts of the Istanbul Process to follow the positive precedent set by the Netherlands, in this regard.

Ms Gaer also drew attention to the importance of the Istanbul Process as a space for introspection rather than finger pointing. All States must look to themselves, and ask what more they can do to turn the words set down in resolution 16/18 into a lived reality for people in their countries. 'If we don't search for solutions close to home we can search in vain for changes at international level,' she said.

Like others, she also underscored the fact that all human rights are interrelated and inter-dependent. Thus, at the same time as combatting religious intolerance and incitement, States must fully respect and protect freedom of expression.

Finally, Ms Gaer urged all States to submit progress reports on the implementation of the 16/18 action plan, as required under relevant Human Rights Council and GA resolutions. 'For resolution 16/18 to have real impact,' she said, 'all countries must invest in monitoring and reporting, with a particular focus on the rights of vulnerable communities.'

## Looking forward: building momentum - High-level panel discussion

The opening segment of the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process also featured a high-level panel discussion with H.E. Mr Stef Blok, H.E. Mr Shafqat Mahmood, H.E. Ms Kate Gilmore, and Dr Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. The aim of the panel was to look forward and consider ways to further energise global efforts to combat religious intolerance.

A key theme running through the discussion was the importance of seizing on the opportunity provided by The Hague meeting to re-energise the Istanbul Process. It was noted by a number of speakers that the contemporary importance of the issue of religious intolerance, hatred and violence is of such a magnitude, that never again should there be a three-year gap between meetings of the Process. Indeed, it should rather be expanded (through, for example, regional meetings) and fully regularised.

Dr Shaheed said that the 'Istanbul Process is coming out of a three-year coma.' It is vital, he said, 'considering the value of the Process as a platform for a regular exchange of good practice, that it is not allowed to slip back into that coma.' In that regard, he welcomed Pakistan's announcement that it would host the eighth meeting of the Process in Islamabad. Dr Shaheed noted that governments are investing increasing energy and resources in promoting freedom of religion – witness the growth in the number of 'FORB ambassadors around the world.' That is undoubtedly positive; however, the true solution to the challenge of religious intolerance will not come from discussions among diplomats, but through exchanges between 'practitioners.' To illustrate this point, Dr Shaheed spoke of the importance of school curricula, and thus of engaging national education ministries. This, he said, would help prevent intolerance in the long-term by 'shaping a new generation with minds more open to differences between people.'

Mr Blok, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, agreed on the importance of ensuring that national education programmes promote religious understanding and respect for differences of belief. Notwithstanding, in addition to working to ensure that tolerance 'trickles down' through the education system, he also emphasised the importance of 'bottom-up' movement – with the experiences of grassroots organisations informing better government policy. It is here, at grass-roots level, he said, where we can start to build a culture of mutual respect and tolerance. The true value of international platforms such as the Istanbul Process is to bring those 'local neighbourhood experiences to an international audience, so we can all learn from each other.' With these points in mind, the Foreign Minister urged all future hosts of meetings of the Process to maintain strong civil society participation.

Mr Mahmood took the opportunity to share some national experiences from Pakistan, in particular in the area of education. He explained that previously Pakistan had suffered from a patchwork of different public and private school curricula. This had allowed, in some cases, schools to become places where intolerance, stigmatisation and misinformation were perpetuated, rather than challenged. Pakistan has therefore undertaken a root-and-branch reform of its school system and has introduced a single national curriculum. That curriculum aims to promote religious tolerance and respect, including by removing any negative stereotyping of people or groups based on their religion or belief. 'Once negative profiling of people decreases, hate crimes will surely follow,' said the Minister.

Mr Mahmood also spoke of the vital and growing importance of social media platforms as amplifiers of discrimination, intolerance and hatred. 'Social media can be very positive for human rights,' he said, however we shouldn't be blind to the fact many people also use it to propagate hate.' He also expressed concern at the creation of 'echo chambers' on social media – 'where people only receive information that tallies with their own preconceived world view.' 'This means mass media, where people could expect to hear from different sides of a debate, is being replaced by segmented media where people are no longer subjected to opposing points of view.'

Ms Gilmore agreed that being exposed to dissenting opinions, and being free to listen to, respect, and constructively argue against them, 'goes to the heart of tolerance.' The basis of tolerant societies, where differences are respected and even celebrated, must be 'the ability of accept difference and disagreement, without trying to crush that dissent.' Building on this point, she urged governments not only to protect space for dissent, but also to be mindful of their own roles in building societies grounded in mutual respect. 'We should be training our civil servants to embrace diversity and pressing our politicians to use their positions to promote love and respect rather than division.' 'If we can do so, our aim should be more than mere tolerance, it should be mutual respect and inclusivity.'

As national politicians, Mr Blok and Mr Mahmood recognised the importance of these points, but explained the difficulties involved in fulfilling international human rights obligations in societies where different groups feel threatened by diversity or feel as though their rights are worth less than the majority. This is the typical breeding-ground of populism. Mr Mahmood however, said it is beholden on all politicians, especially those in government, to 'transcend such advantage-taking and political profit-making, and to always stand-up against division, exclusion and hatred, irrespective of the cost.'



## Break-out groups

After the high-level opening statements and panel discussion, participants were divided into four break-out groups for more in-depth exchanges.

The break-out groups addressed the following two broad themes:

### Theme 1 - Proactive approach: building tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies

Group one: Building tolerant and inclusive societies through inter-religious dialogue, social integration and education (paragraphs 5a, 5h of the 16/18 action plan)

Group two: Preventing negative stereotyping and discrimination in areas such as health, housing, education and employment,

including through training of government officials, promoting dialogue with and within communities, awareness-building and media education (paragraphs 5c, 5d, 5g)

### Theme 2 - Incitement to religious hatred and violence: pushing back

Group three: Implementation of paragraphs 5e and 5f of resolution 16/18, and the Rabat Plan of Action (paragraphs 5e and 5f)

Group four: Working with the media and social media companies (paragraphs 5a and 5g)



## Theme 1 - Proactive approach: building tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies

In line with the widely accepted notion that ‘prevention is better than the cure,’ the two breakout groups under the first theme looked at effective national strategies and good practices to promote inclusive and tolerant societies, free from discrimination, stereotyping, hatred and stigmatisation based on religion or belief. Theme 1 and the two breakout groups under it were premised on an understanding that divisions in society, the marginalisation of certain groups, and radicalisation do not happen overnight. Rather they may be caused by a steady drip of discriminatory/intolerant acts or words over time. Such ‘everyday’ human rights violations and/or abuses might include, for example:

- Daily acts of discrimination or intolerance on the part of public officials;
- Casual comments (especially on the part of government officials or public figures) designed to stigmatise or exclude certain religious or faith-based communities;
- The adoption of public policies that serve to compartmentalise or fragment society along religious (or racial) lines, either by actively discriminating against certain communities, or by failing to proactively promote inclusivity and integration (e.g. in terms of access to housing, education, employment, health services, or public office);
- Misinformation about, and mistrust between adherents of, different religions or faiths – caused, *inter alia*, by a lack of structured contact and dialogue between them, or by a lack of inclusive religious education; and
- Media coverage that tends to perpetuate or exacerbate negative stereotypes.

With these points in mind, the best way to combat intolerance and hatred towards people based on their religion or belief is to take a proactive approach that prevents such daily human rights violations and injustices from happening in the first place. That means, for example, enacting laws and policies that promote social inclusion, integration, and non-discrimination, including through equal access to public services; fostering greater understanding between and within communities as well as faiths; organising education and awareness-raising programmes that serve to confront misinformation and promote inter-religious understanding and dialogue; and conducting human rights training for public officials and media professionals. Such policies and practices also hold out the potential to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda ‘leaving no one behind’ and the Secretary-General’s ‘prevention agenda.’

The two breakout sessions under this first theme provided a space for government representatives, religious community leaders, NGOs and UN experts to share experiences and good practices in the conception and roll-out of such policies and projects – designed to help build tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies.

### Group one: Building tolerant and inclusive societies through inter-religious dialogue, social integration and education (paragraphs 5a, 5h of the 16/18 action plan)

Participants in the first break-out group came together to share information on a broad-range of government and civil society-led initiatives to build tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies.

A number of common threads emerged from the various case studies shared during the session (those individual case studies are presented below).

First, there was wide agreement that it is important to move beyond calls for mere ‘tolerance.’ This word, no matter how well-meaning, suggests that different parts of society should ‘tolerate’ each other despite their differences. In fact, those differences should be respected – even celebrated. As one participant noted: ‘Tolerance is a word from ten years ago; today it is no longer enough. I do not want people to merely tolerate me; I want them to get to know me, and I want them to trust me.’ Building on this understanding, many of the case studies presented in break-out group one showcased policies or projects designed to build inclusive communities and societies, where non-discrimination, the promotion of diversity, and building understanding and trust, are not just positive by-products, but are the central premise and objective.

A second common thread was that while inter-religious dialogue must necessarily be part of efforts to build diversity and mutual respect in society, it is not, in itself, sufficient. One speaker cited research showing that such dialogues may be most useful in the short-term – to defuse particular situations of tension. In the longer-term, it is better to promote policies and construct projects that aim to secure the daily co-existence and interaction of people from different backgrounds (whether religious, ethnic or other). ‘Such efforts to strengthen inclusivity, build trust and promote understanding help to ‘humanise the ‘other’ in society.’

A third thread was that, in the end, building true societal

‘resilience’ against acts of intolerance, hatred or violence, requires a wider focus than just the implementation of the points set out in resolution 16/18. Rather, it requires the implementation, by States, of all their international human rights obligations and commitments, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets ‘leaving no one behind.’ Linked with this point, a number of speakers also called for progress with the development and application of ‘human rights indicators, including for freedom of religion and religious intolerance, so we can quickly identify worrying trends or rising tensions.’

A fourth thread was that each example of government or non-governmental initiatives to build more inclusive, respectful and equal societies are valuable in themselves, but become invaluable when there is an open space or platform for governments and NGOs to share those good practices, experiences and lessons learnt. One or two people therefore called for the Istanbul Process to be ‘localised,’ for example via regional meetings that would better allow national/local stakeholders to learn from each other, and for local communities to become more involved.

Fifth, building on the last point, participants argued that it should not be necessary to wait for the next meeting of the Istanbul Process in order to hear about and learn from the experiences of other governments, NGOs and community leaders. Speakers noted that many of the case studies about, for example, national integration policies were very interesting, and should therefore be compiled and made available to all. In the education field, for example, one government official said it would be very useful to have a ‘map of all the different education policies and programmes, including revisions to national curricula, that have been shared today and that aim to promote inclusion, integration, understanding and respect amongst different religious communities.’ Another agreed, saying she would like to hear more examples of training programmes for government officials (e.g. on religious literacy), and for religious leaders (e.g. on human rights education).

A last common point was that gender and youth perspectives must be integrated into all strategies to prevent religious intolerance and hatred through national/local inclusion.

## CASE STUDY



# MAINSTREAMING HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION THROUGHOUT CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Canada described its shift from a foreign policy approach to religious intolerance and discrimination based around the work of a single ‘Ambassador for religious freedom,’ to an approach to protecting freedom of religion and promoting religious tolerance in an integrated manner – alongside the promotion and protection of all other human rights. In that regard, the role of

Ambassador for religious freedom was discontinued, and its responsibilities integrated within a new ‘Office of Human Rights, Freedom and Inclusion.’ The new Office has three divisions: human rights and indigenous affairs; inclusion and religious freedom; and democracy.

Moreover, as part of these reforms, the inter-linked issues of freedom of religion, inclusion and tolerance, and human rights more broadly, have been placed more squarely and more explicitly in the mandates of all Canadian ambassadors overseas.

A key objective of Canada’s diplomatic outreach in this area is to share the country’s experiences with promoting inclusion and respecting diversity.

## CASE STUDY



# PROMOTING DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

In 2010, to raise awareness about growing anti-Semitism in Dutch society, Lody van de Kamp, a rabbi born in eastern Netherlands to two survivors of the Holocaust, decided to walk the streets of Amsterdam wearing a kippah, and carrying a hidden camera. He encountered a young boy who raised his right arm in a Nazi salute. Hearing of the incident, Saïd Bensellam, a kickboxer of Moroccan descent, who grew up on the streets of Amsterdam

and was well-known amongst young people in the area, decided to call the rabbi to offer his support. Together they went to speak to the boy to help him understand why his actions had been so hurtful. It worked. According to Lody: ‘It turned out that the boy didn’t know anything about the meaning of the Nazi salute; and when I explained he wanted to do everything he could to fix what he had done.’

Since that moment Saïd and Lody have shared a common vision: a society in which everyone can be who they are, without discrimination or violence. The foundation that they subsequently established aims to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to promote dialogue and help them understand the value of diversity and of ‘being different.’ By focusing on interpersonal relationships and sharing personal stories they try to help young people see that ‘there is more that binds us than divides us.’ They work with local communities, schools, youth and social workers, and the Dutch police.

## CASE STUDY



# MULTICULTURALISM AT HOME AND ABROAD

Azerbaijan society is an exceptionally diverse country – culturally, ethnically and religiously. The country takes pride in this diversity, and as such the State (which is officially secular) has adopted ‘multiculturalism’ as a national policy. A key element of the policy is to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue. For example, Azerbaijan’s State Committee on Religious Associations regularly organises conferences, dialogues and training programmes relating to religious literacy, inclusion and engagement, with the participation of representatives of different faiths.

Azerbaijan is also committed to sharing its experiences at international level. For example, in 2008 it founded the ‘Baku Process’ which aims to create space for dialogue between cultures and civilisations. The meeting ended with the adoption of the ‘Baku Declaration on the Promotion of Intercultural Dialogue.’ Then, in 2011, the country hosted the first ‘World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue,’ with the support of UNESCO, the UN Alliance of Civilisations, Council of Europe, and others, and with the participation of officials from 102 countries. In other examples, in 2015 Azerbaijan hosted a conference on ‘Multiculturalism and inter-religious tolerance: The experience of Azerbaijan and its significance for Europe,’ while in 2016 the country welcomed Pope Francis to observe national efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.



CASE STUDY



## TRAINING WOMEN TO PROMOTE TOLERANCE AND FIGHT HATRED

Burkina Faso, a West African country long known for its cultural and religious tolerance, has recently been the victim of several large-scale terrorist attacks. In order to counter the violence and the spread of underlying extremist ideologies, civil society actors have taken a number of steps, including training women to become 'mentors of tolerance.' In combination

with other longer-term programmes and projects to promote inter-religious tolerance and understanding, such as bringing changes to the national curriculum, training local women as 'mentors' has had a significant impact – allowing messages of inclusion and unity to directly reach families and communities at local-level. The first generation of 'mentors' subsequently trained a second generation, and thus their message has spread.

In another example, following a particularly deadly terrorist attack in 2018, a young writer, François Moïse Bamba, decided to use theatre to counter intolerance. His show, 'No one has a monopoly on God' harks back to days in the not-too-distant past when 'it was normal for children to visit each other's places of worship.' 'on religious festival days,' he said, 'Catholic children would visit the local mosque and Muslim children would go to church.'

CASE STUDY



## FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME FOR RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

The King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) is an inter-governmental organisation that promotes inter-religious dialogue to prevent and resolve conflict. KAICIID was opened in 2012 by Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain. The Holy See is a founding observer.

In 2016, KAICIID began a fellowship programme bringing together leaders and educators from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and other religious backgrounds, for training in dialogue facilitation, intercultural communication and promoting social cohesion. The fellows then take these skills back home to the benefit of their local communities.

CASE STUDY



## DOCUMENT ON HUMAN FRATERNITY FOR WORLD PEACE AND LIVING TOGETHER

In February 2019 Pope Francis visited Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates where he met with Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque. This was the first time a head of the Catholic Church had visited the Arabian Peninsula. At the end of the visit, the two men signed a joint statement – a 'Document on human fraternity for world peace and living together.'

The Document is intended to provide a guide to advance 'a culture of mutual respect' and tolerance between adherents of the two religions. In it they call on world leaders to: 'rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere.'

CASE STUDY



## THE EUROPEAN MUSLIM JEWISH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

In 2016, fourteen European religious leaders – seven Jewish and seven Muslims - came together in Vienna with a mission to counter the prejudice, hatred and violence faced by adherents of all faiths, and to instead promote a culture of respect and appreciation of different religious identities.

The Council seeks to uphold common Muslim-Jewish values, protect the universal right to freedom of religion or belief, correct stereotypes and build inter-communal and intra-communal trust and cooperation. Furthermore, the Council's joint Muslim-Jewish educational strategy facilitates intra-community and inter-community understanding and respect for Muslims and Jews in Europe, while establishing bridges to other religious communities and secular groups

CASE STUDY

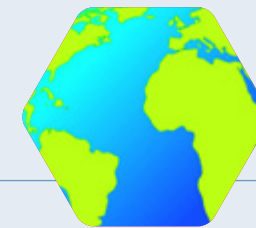


## RELIGION AS PART OF THE SOLUTION

The Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) was established by a group of long-time interfaith activists in the Holy Land. Their point of departure was to create a community in which 'the other' or 'otherness' would not only be accepted, but would be understood and respected.

The IEA is dedicated to the promotion of peaceful co-existence in the Middle East through inter-religious dialogue. It is built on the premise that religion should not be seen as the cause of the problems facing the region, but rather as a source of durable and inclusive solutions.

CASE STUDY



## INTERNATIONAL CONTACT GROUP ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

The International Contact Group on freedom of religion or belief is an informal platform uniting countries committed to strengthening the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief. It brings together national experts on freedom of religion or belief to exchange good practices, and to work together at national, regional and international levels to promote and protect this core human right.

CASE STUDY



## THE MALAYSIAN CENTRE FOR CONSTITUTIONALISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights (MCCHR) was established in 2011 to promote and protect human rights through strategic litigation and awareness-raising programmes, including in the area of religious discrimination and intolerance.

Group two: Preventing negative stereotyping and discrimination in areas such as health, housing, education and employment, including through training of government officials, promoting dialogue with and within communities, awareness-building and media education (paragraphs 5c, 5d, 5g)

Breakout group two provided a space for the exchange of experience and good practice related to laws, policies and projects that take forward the implementation of paragraphs 5c, 5d and 5g of the 16/18 action plan.

Participants in the group said that although the vast majority of UN member States have recognised the international obligation not to discriminate against people on the basis of their religion or belief, in reality these rights are regularly been violated at national level, especially when it comes to access to public services.

In this regard, it was noted that the definition of ‘discrimination’ in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is very broad, and not only includes any distinction or exclusion based on religion or belief, but also any action having the intent or effect of impeding the effective enjoyment of another’s rights. In this regard, it was noted that ‘the classic negative conception of human rights and thus of State approaches to human rights questions’ (i.e. conceptions and approaches limited to not doing harm) is insufficient. What is needed, rather, is a positive agenda premised on building inclusive societies, on promoting equality, and on fairness. Only by building such diverse and inclusive societies, where differences are not merely tolerated but fully respected, can States effectively combat religious intolerance, discrimination, hatred and violence.

In this regard, there was a common view in group two that education, including religious education, is a key foundation stone for inclusive and respectful societies. A representative of the UK Government, for example, explained that the dates of different religious holidays are now taught in British schools, and that the Government has expanded its policy of encouraging early-age inter-faith exchange programmes. This was, she said, a very effective means of overcoming prejudice. Others reported similar positive experiences, noting that as well as educating the youth about differences between people of different religions or faiths, such exchange programmes also help reveal commonalities

between religions, and help to highlight people’s common humanity – which transcends matters of faith.

A representative from Saudi Arabia also spoke of the importance of education and school curricula (this discussion overlapped somewhat with that in breakout group one). He explained that the Saudi Arabian Government recently established a national committee to remove all examples of discrimination from school textbooks and to show instead how the country’s national identity is the product of diverse influences. He said that governments need to understand that ‘the notion of melting pots is from the 1960s; today we need to think more in terms of salad bowls,’ where the different ingredients can be discerned and add to the taste.

Another State representative said that in addition to school programmes, her country had used art and sport projects to overcome differences, challenge stereotypes and build bridges.

One religious community leader, while welcoming all efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, cautioned that such initiatives can be little more than ‘public relations exercises’ or ‘boxes to tick.’ That is especially the case in countries that do not truly respect freedom of religion or belief, he said. What does work, according to the speaker, is when individual religious leaders are carefully chosen – people who are both influential in their community and who truly believe in inter-religious tolerance and understanding. ‘The words and guidance of such leaders can have a snowball effect in the community,’ he said.



Other speakers raised the importance (and power) of religious leaders not only seeking closer ties with other religious communities, but also of speaking out against acts of religious intolerance, hatred or violence; and – in the longer term – of challenging stereotypes. On the latter point, a number of participants in group two underscored the importance of working with the media and individual journalists to shape a fairer and more accurate public picture of different religions and adherents of those religions. This is important at local level, where the media can – often inadvertently – perpetuate negative stereotypes, and thereby foment division; and at national level where the media can have a significant influence on decision-makers, which can lead to the adoption of discriminatory laws.

This discussion in turn led to a debate on how (including levels of State intervention) to ensure a sufficiently diverse and fact-based ‘mediascape’ at national level – a mediascape that avoids being captured by populists and their messages of division, and instead

works to inform and educate the general public on all matters of importance, including religion. It was noted that this is especially challenging in a world where private providers and social media companies are rapidly replacing State broadcasters. Some participants advocated greater State intervention in this field, for example through regulation, while others argued that civil society and religious leaders must engage more with private media and social media companies to encourage greater uptake of positive content.

Finally, there was a debate on whether it is better for States to be officially secular in the context of ensuring equal access to health, education, housing and other services, irrespective of a person’s belief or ethnicity. The broad conclusion of participants was that the most important isn’t whether a State is secular or not, but whether it fulfils its international human rights obligations, and respects the rule of law.





CASE STUDY



## EMPOWERING MODERATE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The Centre for Studies and Research in Values (CSRV) at the Rabita Mohammadia des Oulémas (Mohammadia League of Scholars) is an institute of religious studies founded in 2006 by King Mohammed VI, established to reflect on, and develop strategies for, the promotion of an open and moderate Islam.

A key focus of the work of the CSRV is to prevent hatred and violent extremism through the promotion of inclusion and education in Moroccan society. The Centre aims to do so via the training of religious scholars and leaders, and the provision of educational materials that promote a moderate and inclusive interpretation of religion. The leaders then take this vision of Islam back to their communities and propagate messages of tolerance and equality. As part of this programme, religious leaders are provided with materials that 'deconstruct' radical Islamic discourse, and challenge extremist interpretations of concepts such as 'jihad.' The materials provided to community leaders may be books and pamphlets, but can also be 'theatre exercises, cartoons and comic books, video games and short films.

CASE STUDY



## USING TELEVISION TO TELL THE LIFE STORIES OF VICTIMS OF INTOLERANCE, AND TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING AND INTEGRATION

Ms Myriam Sahraoui is an actress, director and researcher born and raised in Morocco to a Moroccan father and a Dutch mother, and who studied in Amsterdam. From 2017, inspired by her bi-cultural heritage, she co-produced a highly successful Dutch television series 'Groeten uit Holland' ('Greetings from Holland'), which follows five first-generation Dutch citizens of Moroccan descent in their daily lives in the Netherlands, and in their efforts to adapt to Dutch traditions and culture.

The series had a significant impact on the perceptions of people in the Netherlands towards migrants. It helped to challenge popular narratives of North African migrants and Islam as a 'problem' or a 'threat to the traditional Dutch way of life,' and reveal the daily discrimination directed towards, and difficulties faced by, Dutch people of Moroccan descent. According to Ms Sahraoui, it did so by 'using mass media to confront prejudiced stereotypes, breaking down barriers of cultural misunderstanding, showing the shared humanity and life experiences of migrants and members of traditional Dutch society, and showing the wider Dutch population the reality of racism and Islamophobia in the Netherlands and the impact this has on the victims.

The television series was also popular among the immigrant population of the Netherlands, helping them feel understood and included in Dutch society.

CASE STUDY



## USING CONFLICT MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION TO BRIDGE RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

The Kelman Institute is a civil society organisation focused on conflict transformation and peacebuilding at international and intra-societal levels. It aims to foster peace through violence prevention, peace mediation and historical reconciliation. One of the geographical focuses of its work is the Middle East, and specifically the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In that context, the Institute has worked to improve understanding and reduce tensions by working with a group of 20 influential (and moderate) religious leaders from both communities. The selected community leaders were first asked to discuss amongst themselves and exchange opinions on prevailing conceptions of 'the other side.' They were then taken to Belfast in Northern Ireland where they were brought face-to-face with both the consequences of entrenched inter-communal and inter-religious hatred, and the possibility of moving beyond entrenched misconceptions of 'the other' and securing peace.

CASE STUDY



## ENSURING CONSISTENCY IN BRITISH DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE FIELD OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief is a foreign policy priority of the UK. For example, in 2018 the UK appointed its first Special Envoy on freedom of religion or belief. That policy has a dual premise: to draw international attention to the worst cases of violations of the right and discrimination against people because of their faith; and also to maintain a longer-term focus on working with countries to build more inclusive,

tolerant and resilient societies – thereby preventing religious hatred and violence. One important aspect of the latter is to encourage exchanges of good practice between countries and between civil society actors.

The UK is also conscious that it should 'practice what it preaches' and in that regard has undertaken steps to ensure coherence and consistency between its foreign and domestic policies in the field of religious discrimination and intolerance. For example, in 2010 the UK brought together formerly disparate anti-discrimination laws into a single national Equalities Act. This strong legislative framework to promote inclusion, equality and non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, was developed in close consultation with religious communities and leaders.

The UK also places a strong emphasis on gathering data about 'hate crimes' and 'hate speech,' including against certain religious communities.



## Theme 2 - Incitement to religious hatred and violence: pushing back

The issue of incitement to hatred and violence (often referred to as ‘hate speech’) has long been at the core of UN debates about religious intolerance and discrimination.

In 2011, a breakthrough occurred with the passing of UN Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, drawing on work by the Secretary-General of the OIC and others. The key to the success of resolution 16/18 – and a key part of its enduring appeal and importance – was that it managed to bring together the two sides of the argument (i.e. those who believed that ‘the best antidote to hate speech is more speech,’ and those who wanted the international community to take a much more interventionist approach), and cover both within a single policy framework that also respected the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

However, in order to enable this accommodation relevant parts of the 16/18-action plan were left broadly defined – including paragraph 5f (i.e. States should ‘adopt measures to criminalise incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief’). Partly to help bring greater clarity to, and help build greater understanding around, the practical meaning of this paragraph, and also to make sure that State actions in this area would remain consistent with their obligation to respect freedom of expression, in 2013 a group of international experts, led by OHCHR, launched the ‘Rabat Plan of Action’. This important document aims to provide a framework for understanding the obligation to prohibit incitement, and a blueprint for its implementation in line with international human rights standards.

These efforts have become even more urgent over the past decade with the growing reach and influence of social media. Today, hateful expression or incitement to violence can and does spread rapidly around the world. Many attacks against both religious communities and groups of people who do not hold any religious beliefs have involved individuals who became radicalised by hateful online expression. These tragedies have served to place the issue of ‘hate speech online’ high-up on the international political agenda.

In addition to hate speech online, this second theme of the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process also looked at the importance of political and other leaders (e.g. faith-based leaders) ‘leading by example’ by: a) not themselves using hate speech or incitement, and b) speaking out quickly and in a coordinated manner in response to acts of violence/hate in the name of religion or faith. Linked with this, the theme also covered the importance of media professionals acting responsibly and not, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuating stereotypes, repeating/echoing hate speech, profiling those responsible for hate crimes, or fermenting hatred against certain groups.

The two breakout sessions under this theme provided a space for government representatives, faith-based and community leaders, social media and other technology companies, NGOs and UN experts to share experiences and good practices in the conception and roll-out of relevant laws, policies and projects.



### Group three: Implementation of paragraphs 5e and 5f of resolution 16/18, and the Rabat Plan of Action (paragraphs 5e and 5f)

The third breakout group session served to provide a space for the exchange of experience and good practices in the implementation of paragraphs 5e and 5f of the 16/18 action plan regarding ‘speaking out against intolerance, including advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence’ and ‘adopting measures to criminalise incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief.’

Notwithstanding, a good deal of the discussion in the group focused on necessary legal and political responses to ‘hate speech,’ especially ‘hate speech online.’

As with all previous meetings of the Istanbul Process, the session saw interventions from those concerned that legitimate concerns over ‘hate speech’ should not be used as a pretext or reason to curb legitimate free speech; and from those who believe stronger legal means should be used to curb and prevent such speech.

On the former side, one speaker reminded participants that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is clear (article 20.2) on what types of speech shall be prohibited by law (i.e. any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence). He noted that prohibition by law does not necessarily mean criminalisation, and that hateful speech such as the use of religious slurs does not necessarily constitute incitement. The speaker also underscored the importance of the conditions set down in article 19.3 of the ICCPR that should be met before a State decides to restrict free speech (i.e. that any restrictions are necessary in order to protect the rights or reputations of others, or to protect national security, public order, health or morals). Undue restrictions, it was noted, such as ‘blasphemy laws’ can have a chilling effect on free speech and democracy, and usually lead to the targeting of minorities rather than their protection.

It was further explained that articles 19 and 20 do not provide a framework for addressing religious intolerance more broadly, or for addressing hateful speech that does not constitute incitement to religious discrimination, hostility or violence. That is why resolution 16/18 was negotiated and adopted, and supplemented by the Rabat Plan of Action (which seeks to qualify speech that does indeed amount to incitement and speech that does not). Resolution 16/18, according to the speaker, sets out a broad legal, political and social approach to combatting intolerance, including hate speech, by building inclusive and resilient societies.

Others, however, disagreed, drawing attention to the importance of legal accountability for ‘hate speech,’ especially for victims who often cannot rely on wider ‘societal checks.’ In this regard, it was noted that members of minority groups often lack the political or press connections needed to defend themselves against attacks in the media. This often leaves targeted populations facing a steady, daily drip of hateful expression, which in turn leads to a sense of powerlessness and marginalisation. It is in such conditions that extremism and violence can emerge.

Another participant agreed and quoted the Special Rapporteur on minorities who said: ‘not all hate speech always results in hate crime but when there is hate speech, there is a priori stigmatisation and dehumanisation of the targeted group and minority.’ The speaker acknowledged that different countries will have different views and perspectives on ‘hard law approaches’ to hate speech, depending on their cultural, social and historical contexts. However, he said, it is difficult to argue that strong approaches like Singapore’s ‘Maintenance of religious harmony act’ have not been successful.

In response to these last points, another participant proposed that non-judicial complaint mechanisms may be a good way of helping to reassure and protect members of religious minority groups, without recourse to the courts. For example, victims are able, in many countries, to provide information on hate speech or hate crimes to government hotlines or ombudsman’s offices. This has the added advantage of allowing the State to gather data on

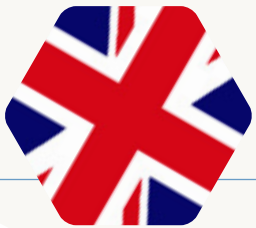


religious and other forms of intolerance. A civil society speaker said that NGOs that enjoy the confidence of affected communities are often better placed than governments to receive and analyse such complaints/data. An academic agreed on the importance of non-judicial mechanisms – though in his view, as part of the State – to which victims can have recourse to file complaints about incidences of hate speech and hate crimes, and to monitor trends. He also went further and called for an international-level mechanism or ‘committee’ to track global incidences of religious intolerance, stigmatisation and violence.

Although there were considerable disagreements about the implementation of paragraph 5f of resolution 16/18, there was a greater alignment of views on paragraph 5e (speaking out). A number of speakers mentioned the important role of parliamentarians in this regard, both to ‘set the tone’ for public discourse, and to ‘speak out’ in response to the ‘hate speech’ of others in society. One speaker noted that this latter role can, and increasingly does, include challenging hateful or divisive language ‘used by other parliamentarians or government ministers.’ Likewise, constructive and unifying responses from governments to episodes of religious violence or incitement (e.g. the New Zealand Government’s response to the Christchurch attacks) were also highlighted as good practice.

Moreover, it is not only politicians who have a responsibility to speak out. The important role of teachers was raised by many participants. As with bullying, it is vital that teachers do speak out where they uncover cases of religious intolerance in schools, that they work with all concerned to promote understanding about the consequences of such acts, and – in the longer term – that they take steps to promote understanding. Likewise, the crucial role of religious leaders in speaking out against acts of hatred, and doing so in a manner that reduces tensions rather than further inflame them, was also highlighted. According to one speaker, the words of religious leaders can have an incredibly powerful effect, because they are able to couch them in terms of faith – making them understandable and comforting for the affected community. As an example of this, a representative of Norway spoke of their ‘interfaith alliance’ and its anti-hate campaign. Another participant spoke of the ‘Fez plan of action on the role of religious leaders in preventing incitement.’

Many agreed with these points but also offered a word of caution: that in speaking out religious community leaders can often place themselves at great personal risk. Therefore, ‘they should never be forced to speak out, and should receive special protection when they do.’



#### CASE STUDY

### THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PREVENTING INCITEMENT TO VIOLENCE

Between 2015 and 2016, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention organised a series of consultations with religious leaders, faith-based and secular organisations, and other experts, in order to better understand, articulate and encourage the potential of religious leaders to prevent religious incitement and violence. This ‘Fez process’ led to the adoption of a ‘Plan of action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.’ Although the consultations were organised specifically in the context of preventing atrocity crimes, it was recognised that the principles and actions set out through the ‘Fez process’ are relevant for all efforts to address religious intolerance, incitement and violence.

During the meeting in The Hague, a participant in the European consultation of the Fez process, Reverend Bonnie Evans-Hills, an Anglican priest and member of the ‘Churches Together Inter-Faith Theological Advisory Group,’ presented the meeting’s conclusions and outcomes. She explained that three particular areas of concern had been identified: radicalisation, rising levels of hate speech, and a lack of humanity in responses to the plight of refugees. On the issue of hate speech, the European consultation had confirmed the crucial importance of religious leaders in speaking out against acts of intolerance and in setting the tone for respectful public discourse. In that regard, it had drawn particular attention to the importance of female members of the clergy also (not just men) being empowered to speak out, especially considering that the victims of hate speech and hate crimes could just as easily be women as men. Unfortunately, female religious leaders were often silenced by their male counterparts.

Reverend Evans-Hills also spoke of the important role of religious leaders in reassuring targeted populations after incidences of discrimination or intolerance. At such times, targeted communities could often feel marginalised, neglected and at-risk; and community leaders, working with government authorities and the police, should necessarily play an important role in offering comfort and reassurance.





#### CASE STUDY

### COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO ACTS OF HATRED AND VIOLENCE

As referenced during the opening high-level session, Ms Husna Ahmed was one of the 51 people killed during the Christchurch attacks in March 2019. Her husband, Farid Ahmed, a religious community leader, survived. Afterwards, he spoke movingly about the need to respond to such acts of hatred not with more hate, but with love and compassion. He explained that during the attacks he had felt pity for the perpetrator who, according to Mr Ahmed, ‘must have lived through something that he had not been able to deal with.’ Farid said that the response of communities that have gone through such experiences should not turn inwards, but reach out to others in society and build connections so such acts of hatred and violence are not repeated. Mr Ahmed also commended the rapid and compassionate response of the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. This, he said, had helped strengthen community bonds, and begin the process of healing. It was also important that the Government had been careful not to name the attacker or to repeat his manifesto, as this prevented further acts of incitement and violence.



#### CASE STUDY

### COMMISSION ON NON-DISCRIMINATION

There was much discussion in breakout group three about the importance of non-criminal or non-judicial mechanisms where victims of hate speech or hate crimes may have recourse. In that regard, Uruguay has a ‘Commission on non-discrimination,’ which does not take judicial decisions but rather issues non-binding recommendations to those involved, especially the perpetrators. Uruguay’s Ambassador to the Netherlands and former President of the UN Human Rights Council, Laura Dupuy Lasserre, explained that such recommendations can be very useful to help resolve disputes, including those involving religious intolerance. Offering one example, she referred to the case of a hotel that had accepted or rejected clients based on their religion or belief. The Commission had recommended that the hotel be closed, at least under its then ownership, and that is what, in the end, had happened.

The Ambassador also joined others in arguing that such non-judicial mechanisms also play an important role in data collection, which helps national and local authorities identify problems at an early stage, understand the root causes of hatred and discrimination, and take early remedial action.

### Group four: Working with the media and social media companies (paragraphs 5a and 5g)

Breakout group four provided a space for an exchange of experience and good practices related to laws, policies and projects that take forward the implementation of paragraph 5a of the 16/18 action plan which encourages the creation of collaborative networks in fields such as education, health, employment, integration and media training; and paragraph 5g which underscores the importance of combatting denigration and negative religious stereotyping of persons, as well as incitement to religious hatred through, for example, education and awareness-raising.

There was a widely held view in the group that the subject matter under discussion was an important and timely one, especially in the modern, globalised and hyper-connected world. ‘We cannot avoid the fact,’ said one, ‘that today the majority of hate speech and incitement to violence is disseminated online, especially via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Another agreed, but said the problem is wider than that: ‘social media has created a mosaic of echo chambers, where individuals have their own opinions and prejudices reinforced, and cannot access dissenting views on facts.’ ‘As a result,’ he said, ‘communities and

societies have become steadily more polarised in all spheres of public and private life, including as regards to matters of religion.’

Many participants spoke of the importance of not merely dealing with the symptoms of intolerance (i.e. hate speech online), but also the root causes, including ignorance, fear, isolation and mistrust. In this regard, as in other breakout groups, the importance of education, including human rights education and religious education, was emphasised, as was the importance of people from different backgrounds and faiths ‘getting to know one another through, for example, inter-religious dialogues, inviting Jewish and Muslim children to Sunday School, ensuring that new public housing projects have mixed occupancy (i.e. including people from different ethnic, religious and other backgrounds),’ etc. ‘This is a more effective and, in principle, easier approach than monitoring millions of tweets, identifying those that incite hatred or violence, and then removing them.’ Another speaker agreed, adding that ‘positive messages about religion or belief, and about different faith communities, messages that point to commonalities rather than differences, should also be part of any policy mix.’

Notwithstanding, there was also broad support for recent regulatory, non-regulatory and industry-led initiatives to ‘take down’ hateful content – while protecting freedom of expression. ‘Whether we like it or not, the Internet and social media have





shifted the rules of the game – today a video or message inciting violence against a particular religious group can be uploaded in one place and quickly spread around the world, with unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences.’

That said, there was wide agreement that ‘identifying hate speech and taking it down before it has begun to spread, especially in multiple different languages, is easier said than done.’ ‘It may be relatively easy,’ explained one social media representative, to spot and take down content which very obviously aims to incite religious hatred or violence. However, in most cases it is not so obvious; either because those who wish to propagate hatred choose to couch their words in a way that is difficult to spot, or because the expression is ‘borderline.’ A further layer of difficulty comes, it was explained, from the fact that the same expression may merely be ‘offensive’ in one cultural context but be likely to incite hatred or violence in another. ‘Add complexities of language and dialect, and of human capacity (‘algorithms cannot replace the human eye’), and the challenge becomes even more pronounced.’

Such challenges are especially important, according to one civil society speaker, when one considers that the real problem – especially from a prevention perspective – is less the obvious cases of incitement to violence and more ‘the soft underbelly of hate speech, the steady, daily drip of words that serve to marginalise, humiliate, and isolate.’

Responding to Facebook, a civil society representative criticised social media companies for taking so long to recognise the problem of hate speech online, and to recognise their own responsibilities to do something about it. ‘The problem,’ he said, ‘is the extreme power imbalance between companies like Facebook and individual users.’ ‘We are powerless, and they can increasingly act with complete impunity.’ To redress this imbalance, the civil society representative suggested the elaboration of a ‘digital bill of rights’ for users. Another civil society speaker said it is wrong that companies like Facebook and Twitter ‘hide behind uncertainties in terms of how to define or draw a line with hate speech.’ Others disagreed however, explaining that governments have been wrestling with such definitional issues for decades, and have only made limited progress; and it is therefore unfair to expect private companies to magically solve the problem.

A number of government officials and civil society representatives, joined a participant from the private sector in calling for ‘partnerships’ as the only way to resolve the ‘incredibly important but also difficult and sensitive issue of hate speech online.’ ‘We should start from a premise that we all want to find solutions, and that finding them will be easier if we work together,’ said

a social media representative. Those solutions could be either regulatory or non-regulatory. ‘Unfortunately,’ he continued, ‘the negative image of, and lack of trust in, social media and Internet companies, is in many cases hindering collaboration.’ A number of participants called for ‘more spaces, like the Istanbul Process, where digital technology companies, governments, civil society and faith groups can meet, to build trust and develop partnerships.’

A representative from Facebook explained that the company had ‘taken down or blocked more than 4.5 million versions of the video showing the Christchurch attacks.’ ‘1.2 million copies were blocked before being uploaded, and 1.5 million were removed within 24 hours,’ he said. He explained that this relies on a mixture of automatic filters (e.g. ‘hashtag filtering’), flagging by other users, and human intervention (i.e. Facebook employees). ‘Unfortunately,’ he explained, ‘none of the first 200 users to view the Christchurch video chose to flag it, and this meant it was subsequently copied and reloaded thousands of times before Facebook became aware and took steps to block it.’

Highlighting the challenge of combatting hate speech online, while respecting freedom of expression, one civil society speaker argued that even ‘flagging and take downs raise important freedom of speech and opinion issues.’ Using the new French law that seeks to regulate hate speech online as an example (see below), she warned that the heavy fines levied against companies that fail to remove illegal content within 24 hours means that many of those companies will be overzealous in what they take down.

Facebook’s representative explained that the company is fully aware of these challenges and risks and will always do its utmost to respect freedom of expression. For example, it has developed a ‘graded’ scale to distinguish between illegal content and content that is merely offensive or provocative. ‘Facebook is also setting up an independent oversight body to review borderline decisions,’ he said.

Turning to the issue of using ‘positive speech’ to help combat ‘hate speech,’ a number of speakers suggested that social media companies like Facebook could provide and promote pages to disseminate stories and case studies such as those shared at the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process. Such pages could also offer educational and awareness-raising materials. A representative from the Universal Rights Group (URG), one of the organisers of the meeting, announced that URG, the Government of the Netherlands and Article 19 would shortly launch a new Istanbul Process website that would also seek to do some of these things.

## CASE STUDY



## AVIA LAW ON THE REMOVAL OF HATEFUL CONTENT

In 2019 the French Parliament adopted a new law on online hate speech, the ‘Avia law,’ which regulates the ‘take down’ of racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic and other hateful content. The law was put forward by Ms Laetitia Avia MP, a lawyer who grew up in the low-income Paris banlieue suburbs to Togolese parents, and regularly suffered racist abuse on Twitter.

According to Ms Avia: ‘We cannot tolerate on the Internet what we won’t tolerate in the street.’ At the moment, she notes, those who incite hatred and even violence online ‘have almost total impunity.’

Under the new law, hateful content reported by users must be removed within 24 hours by social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube. This includes any hateful attack on someone’s ‘dignity’ on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability. If the social media platforms and tech companies do not comply, they will face large

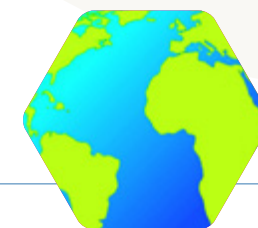
fines of up to 4% of their global revenue. There will also be a new judicial body to focus on online hate speech. Finally, social media companies now have to add buttons on their platforms allowing users to flag hateful or offensive content.

The new law is part of French President Emmanuel Macron’s drive to make France a frontrunner in the regulation of big social media platforms. He announced the planned crackdown on online hate at a dinner for Jewish groups last year, amid a rise of anti-Semitic acts in France. In late 2019, after a meeting with President Macron, Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg agreed to hand over data on French users suspected of hate speech.

The French law is in part inspired by similar German legislation on online hate speech, which came into force in 2018. The German law was criticised by some freedom of expression advocates as being overly broad and placing too many restrictions on free speech.

A representative of the French Government, speaking at the meeting in The Hague, underlined the fact that the ‘Avia law’ was designed and developed in consultation with social media companies. This is important as it is ‘only through partnerships that we can solve this complex problem.’ He also explained that the new law is expected to help prevent violent extremism, as many young people become radicalised via the Internet – either because they read content that incites hatred or violence against others, or because they are themselves targeted by hate speech.

## CASE STUDY



## SOCIAL MEDIA INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS HATE SPEECH

According a representative of Facebook at the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process: ‘social media companies are acutely aware of and determined to help tackle the problem of hate speech, especially after the attacks in Christchurch.’ He argued, however, that progress in this area will only be possible if all relevant stakeholders – social media companies, governments, civil society and faith groups – work together. Unfortunately,

however, ‘there is a general lack of trust – social media companies are often portrayed as the enemy.’

The speaker said that Facebook has been investing significantly in research and development to find technology solutions (e.g. algorithms) to identify and take-down hateful content even before it is reported by other users. Unfortunately, however, this is very challenging in practice because of the lack of a precise definition of ‘hate speech’, especially across different social, linguistic and cultural contexts, a desire not to undermine freedom of speech, and a wish not to ‘step on the toes of governments.’

On the point about imprecise definitions of hate speech and the need to protect free speech, Facebook has decided to establish an independent oversight board to review its decisions in this area.



## COMPREHENSIVE EU-WIDE POLICY TO TACKLE RACISM, XENOPHOBIA AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION

A representative of the European Commission presented the EU's 'comprehensive policy' to tackle racism, xenophobia and discrimination (including religious intolerance), including via a Working Paper on 'Countering racism and xenophobia in the EU,' and an EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online. There are clear signs, she said, that intolerance, racism, xenophobia and discrimination are on the rise in Europe. Hate speech, discrimination and intolerance have terrible consequences for individual victims, and also challenge the founding values of the EU.

As part of that effort, in March 2019 it published a Staff working document entitled 'Countering racism and xenophobia in the EU: fostering a society where pluralism, tolerance and non-discrimination prevail.' It outlines a 'comprehensive policy approach to foster equality and non-discrimination, as well as to prevent and fight against all forms of racism and xenophobia.' This includes both 'horizontal measures' to address the underlying issues associated with discrimination and intolerance, as well as policy responses to the specific challenges faced by particular groups or communities.



## MOBILISING THE WORLD'S YOUTH, GLOBAL

A Common World Among the Youth (ACWAY) is a global youth movement that aims to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to increase mutual understanding of different societies, cultures and faiths.

Regarding hate speech, and specifically hate speech online, the speaker presented the European Commission's work to ensure that the Internet remains a free, safe and tolerant space where EU laws are enforced, in full respect of the right to freedom of expression. In particular, steps have been taken to counter the proliferation of illegal hate speech online, as defined by national laws implementing the EU's Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia.

A major flagship initiative in this area is the 'Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online,' presented together with Facebook, Microsoft, Google (YouTube) and Twitter in May 2016. The Code's main objective is to ensure that illegal hate speech is expeditiously assessed and, where necessary, removed. The impact of the Code of Conduct has been regularly monitored and the most recent results show a very positive trend. Two and a half years after adoption of the Code, evaluations show that technology companies respond to notices within 24 hours in the majority of cases and remove, on average, 72% of content notified to them, compared to 59% in 2017 and only 28% in 2016. The positive results of the work under the Code of Conduct has also attracted the attention of other IT companies. Since 2018, Instagram, Google+, Snapchat and others have announced their intention to join, and the Code now covers approximately 86% of the EU market share of social media platforms.

Finally, it was explained that the Code and related EU initiatives also play an important role in collecting data on hate speech, which helps inform evidence-based policy responses; and in supporting 'positive narratives of tolerance and pluralism, and promoting awareness-raising and educational activities.'

Those young people then take that knowledge, as well as new skills and best practices, back to their communities. One important area of such community work is in addressing religious discrimination and intolerance. ACWAY also uses technology, including the Internet and social media platforms, to spread positive narratives, and to position the world's youth as a key player in finding solutions to the world's problems.

## Knowledge fair

On 19 November a knowledge fair or 'marketplace' was held on the side-lines of the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process, during which different State and non-State actors were able to present and share good practices from projects designed to promote religious tolerance, respect and understanding, and combat discrimination, hatred and stigmatisation – in line with the 16/18 action plan.

The knowledge fair featured stalls and presentations from:

**Humanist International** – an umbrella organisation for humanist movements around the world. Humanist International presented its regular 'Freedom of thought report,' which documents instances of discrimination against atheists and non-religious persons around the world.

*Humanistisch Verbond* (**Humanistic Association Netherlands**) presented its work to provide information and advice to local communities, including in the area of freedom of religion or belief, and its educational work in schools, the armed forces and prisons.

**The Freedom of Religion or Belief Learning Platform** works in partnership with a wide range of secular and faith-based organisations to provide information and knowledge to 'help individuals, communities and decision makers learn, reflect upon and promote freedom of religion or belief.' In this regard, it runs training courses for teachers, religious community leaders, legislators, diplomats, journalists and others, to promote 'religious literacy.'

**Academie van de Stad**, based in Amsterdam, works to stimulate interactions between communities through youth empowerment and urban development.

**Anne Frank House** is a museum in Amsterdam exhibiting the house and life story of Anne Frank, a young Jewish girl who wrote a diary about her experiences during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Anne Frank House works to use this story to educate people, including young people, about the past as a means of preventing prejudice, discrimination, racism and anti-Semitism today and in the future.

A Common World Among the Youth (**ACWAY**) is a global youth movement dedicated to building interfaith networks and empowering its members to undertake grassroots activities to build community tolerance, respect, understanding and resilience.

**Saïd en Lody** is a Dutch organisation that aims to use dialogue, collaboration, shared reflection and education to combat religious intolerance, (see page 19).

**Article 19**, an international NGO focused on freedom of expression, presented its work to promote free speech and freedom of religion or belief, and to address the issue of incitement to religious hatred and violence.

**TellMama** is a UK-based NGO that seeks to monitor, record and classify instances of anti-Muslim hate crimes. Though its platform, victims of anti-Muslim violence or hate speech are able to report and express their concerns about such acts. The organisation also works to challenge prevailing narratives of prejudice, intolerance and bigotry. Moreover, the data it collects is used to inform police work and government policy.

**The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights** is a national human rights institution (NHRI) and works to educate people about, and help them enjoy, fundamental human rights – including the right to freedom of religion or belief. It also provides guidance to the government on human rights concerns, including religious intolerance.

**MO & MOOS** is a Dutch platform where members from Jewish and Muslim communities can come together to exchange experiences and good practices in a safe, tolerant and inclusive environment. As part of this work it organises educational workshops in schools to promote tolerance and respect between the two communities, and to bridge differences. It also does considerable work in the wider area of social inclusion.

**Police for all** is an initiative of the Rotterdam Police Department aimed at promoting inclusive and community-based approaches to policing through, for example, diversity training, human rights education, and events with different religious and ethnic groups. The aim is to create partnerships between police officers and the communities they serve.



# Plenary session: ‘connecting the dots’

During the further plenary session, participants shared information on a variety of fora, initiatives and institutions that, using different approaches, aim to contribute to promoting religious tolerance and inclusion.

## DR AZZA KARAM, COORDINATOR OF THE UN INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE ON RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT AND SECRETARY GENERAL-ELECT OF WORLD CONFERENCE OF RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

Dr Karam began by recognising that the UN itself still has a lot to learn about building a culture of religious tolerance across the Organisation. The UN has traditionally been seen as a secular space by its staff, however the Inter-Agency Task Force found that UN representatives on the ground, such as members of UN Country Teams, increasingly understand the value of working with religious actors and understanding (and being sensitive to) religious beliefs in order to fulfil their mandates. Today, it is mainly in Geneva and New York that religion is kept in a ‘glass box.’

Based on the experiences of UN Country Teams, the Task Force has drawn three main conclusions. First, religious actors are often the most important stakeholders in local decision-making, as well as in the local enforcement of national policies. Second, faith-based actors are often crucial providers of social services, including health, education, and poverty relief. This in turn makes them key players in the promotion and protection of human rights, and the realisation of the SDGs. Third, in many countries and communities, religion and politics are intertwined, and therefore religious actors must be engaged if the UN is to support progress in areas such as human rights and development.

Initially, this growing UN engagement with local religious actors was focused on peace and security, and humanitarian work. However, more recently there has been far greater attention paid to the role of such actors (in partnership with governments and the UN) in supporting progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in implementing States’ human rights obligations. In this regard, there has been a particularly close working relationship at the intersection of religion, belief and women’s rights.

## H.E. MR FAISAL BIN ABDULRAHMAN BIN MUAAMMAR, SECRETARY GENERAL, CENTRE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE (KAICIID)

The King Abdullah Centre for Interreligious Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna works with governments and religious leaders to make the case that religion should be seen as part of the solution to the world’s most pressing challenges – not as part of the problem.

Since its establishment, the Centre has established a number of important platforms, including the ‘Jewish-Muslim Council in Europe’ and a ‘Buddhist-Muslim Forum in Asia’. Its work is premised on generating real impact on the ground, by working with and creating partnerships between, policymakers and religious leaders.

The Secretary-General proposed that KAICIID could, in 2020, help to organise a special meeting of the Istanbul Process to review progress with each of the parts of the 16/18 action plan.

## MR KISHAN MANOCHA, SENIOR ADVISER ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF AT THE OSCE OFFICE FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS (ODIHR)

The OSCE is the largest security organisation in the world. Its member States have committed to fostering ‘comprehensive, broad-based and sustainable security.’ That includes addressing the root causes of conflict, such as religious intolerance and discrimination. These and other human rights concerns (e.g. gender equality) are dealt with through the OSCE’s ‘human dimensions of security’ programme.

OSCE fully recognises the important role that religious actors can and must play in this regard. OSCE works closely with religious leaders to support inclusion, respect and non-discrimination, and to forge ties between different religious communities. The ultimate goal is to build societal resilience, thus preventing conflict.

Through such programmes of engagement, the OSCE has drawn three broad conclusions. First, it is important to build broad and inclusive coalitions at grassroots level. Second,

building partnerships with religious leaders and communities is vital for addressing tensions, and for building sustainable peace and security. Such actors have invaluable local knowledge and enjoy the trust of local communities. Third, finding the ‘sweet spot’ between universal rights and local context is crucial to build resilient societies. Human rights progress, including in combatting religious intolerance and hatred, must be bottom-up rather than imposed.

## MR JEROEN SCHOKKENBROEK, DIRECTOR OF ANTI-DISCRIMINATION, COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Members States of the Council of Europe have become increasingly concerned over recent years by the steep rise in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric and acts in Europe. This is linked, in part, with the refugee crisis, the rise of populist politicians in many countries, and with bigotry that associates Islam with international terrorism. According to Mr Schokkenbroek, these and other dynamics have seen ‘racism and religious hatred, including hate speech, move from the fringes of European society to the mainstream.’ This, he said, presented an enormous risk to inclusion and cohesion in our societies. To help push back against these worrying trends, the Council of Europe is working with its members to put in place regulatory and non-regulatory responses to hate speech, and to develop education and information programmes with Europe’s youth. A good example of this work is the ‘No hate speech’ campaign on social media.

## MS ERIN MORRISS, DEPUTY HEAD OF MISSION, EMBASSY OF NEW ZEALAND TO THE NETHERLANDS

After the terrorist attacks in Christchurch in 2019, which claimed the lives of 51 people, the Government of New Zealand launched a new pluri-national initiative: ‘the Christchurch Call.’ The attacks were the result of incitement to religious hatred and violence spread via the Internet. Moreover, by filming the violence and posting it on Facebook, the perpetrator was in effect trying to ‘weaponize social media’ and incite further hatred and violence.

It was clear to the New Zealand Government that existing rules and regulations for the use of social media were grossly insufficient. Hence the launch of the Christchurch Call, a global diplomatic initiative designed to find practical solutions by building partnerships between States and social media companies. Those solutions must be effective, respect international human rights law, and be inclusive of the views and concerns of civil society and religious communities. ‘No country and no company can win the fight against online hate speech on their own. It is a global problem, requiring a global solution,’ said Ms Morriss. It is crucial that we do find that solution in order to protect people from the kinds of hatred and violence we saw in Christchurch, and instead to build inclusive, tolerant and open societies. As a famous Maori proverb says: ‘What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people.’



# Closing plenary session

The seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process in The Hague concluded with a final plenary session during which ‘rapporteurs’ from the four breakout groups had the opportunity to brief all participants at the meeting on the conclusions and outcomes of

their discussions. These ‘reports back’ were then supplemented by comments and reflections from a number of ‘discussants’ and by reactions from the floor.



## Annex I

### Agenda

#### MONDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2020

09.30-09.40

##### Welcome and introduction

Introduction by the Chair, H.E. Mr. Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief

09.40-10.10

##### High-level Session

Welcome remarks by H.E. Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

H.E. Mr. Shafqat Mahmood, Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training, Pakistan

H.E. Ms. Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

H.E. Mr. Carlos Mario Foradori, Vice President of the Human Rights Council

Ms. Karen Smith, in her capacity as a representative for the UN Secretary-General's Strategy and Action Plan against Hate Speech

H.E. Ms. Nassima Baghli, Permanent Observer of the OIC to the UN Office in Geneva

H.E. Mr Eamon Gilmore, EU Special Representative for Human Rights

H.E. Ambassador Mohammad Alami Musa, Chairperson of the Islamic Religious Council, Republic of Singapore

Ms. Felice Gaer, Director of AJC's Jaboc Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights

10.10-10.30

##### Panel Discussion on “Looking Forward: Building Momentum”

Moderator: H.E. Mr. Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief

Panelists: H.E. Mr. Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

H.E. Mr. Shafqat Mahmood, Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training, Pakistan

H.E. Ms. Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

10.30-10.45

##### Participants' group photograph

10:45-11.15

##### Coffee break

11.15-12.30

##### High-level Session (continued)

H.E. Mr. Carlos Mario Foradori, Vice President of the Human Rights Council for GRULAC, and Permanent Representative of the Argentine Republic to the UN and other International Organisations in Geneva

H.E. Mr. Eamon Gilmore, EU Special Representative for Human Rights, European Union



Ms. Karen Smith, in her capacity as a representative for the UNSG Strategy and Action Plan against hate speech

H.E. Ambassador Nassima Baghli, OIC Permanent Observer to the United Nations Office in Geneva, reading the statement of H.E. Dr. Yousef Al Othaimen, Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

12.30-14.00

Lunch

14.00 - 17.30

Breakout sessions

**Theme 1 – Proactive approach: building tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies**

*Group 1 – Building tolerant and inclusive societies through inter-religious dialogue, social integration and education (paragraphs 5a, 5h)*

Chair-rapporteur – H.E. Dr. Bahia Tahzib-Lie, Human Rights Ambassador of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands

Discussants - Dr. Ibrahim Salama, Chief, Human Rights Treaties Branch, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Mr. Guilherme Vilela Ribeiro de Carvalho, Director of Promotion and Education in

Human Rights of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, Brazil

Ms. Giuliana Natale, Director, Democracy, Inclusion and Religious Freedom, Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion, Global Affairs Canada

Mufti Dr. Aziz ef. Hasanović, President of Meshihat of Islamic Community, Croatia

Rabbi Lody B. van de Kamp, author and co-founder of Saïd & Lody, Netherlands

*Group 2 - Preventing negative stereotyping and discrimination in areas such as health, housing, education and employment, including through training of government officials, promoting dialogue with and within communities, awareness-building and media education (paragraphs 5c, 5d, 5g)*

Chair-rapporteur – Imam Ani Zonneveld, Founder and President, Muslims for Progressive Values and Alliance of Inclusive Muslims

Discussants - H.E. Ms Rita French, Deputy Permanent . Representative to the United Nations in Geneva and International Ambassador for Human Rights, United Kingdom

Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Dr. Mohammed Belekbir, Director of the Center for Studies and Research in Values,

at the Rabita Mohammedia des Oulémas (Mohammadia League of Scholars), Morocco

Ms. Myriam Sahraoui, Entrepreneur in Media and Culture, the Netherlands

**Theme 2 – Incitement to religious hatred and violence: pushing back**

*Group 3 – Implementation of paragraphs 5e and 5f of resolution 16/18, and the Rabat Plan of Action (paragraphs 5e and 5f)*

Chair-rapporteur – Mr. Andrew Smith, Head of UN Advocacy, ARTICLE 19

Discussants - Prof. David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression

Mr. Knox Thames, Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia, Office of International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State

The Rev'd Bonnie Evans-Hills, Anglican Priest and member of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland inter-faith Theological Advisor Group, UK

Mr. Ahmer Bilal Soofi, Founder and President of Research Society of International Law, Pakistan

Mr. Farid Ahmed, Christchurch shooting survivor and senior leader at the Deans Ave Mosque, New Zealand

*Group 4 – Working with the media and social media companies (paragraphs 5a and 5g)*

Chair-rapporteur – Ms. Gayatri Khandhadai, Asia Policy Regional Coordinator, Association for Progressive Communications

Discussants – H.E. Mr. Jean-Christophe Peaucelle, Ambassador, Adviser for Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, France

Ms. Louisa Klingvall, Team Leader, Fundamental Rights Policy Unit, DG for Justice and Consumers, European Commission

Mr. Adam Cowden, Policy Associate, Content Policy Team, Facebook

Mr. Maziar Bahari, Journalist, Author and Filmmaker, Iran/Canada

Ms. Jolyda Sou, representative of ACWAY (A Common Word Among the Youth), Cambodia

**A coffee break during the break out group sessions will be held between 15.15 – 15.45**

17.30 - 19.00

Reception for participants

TUESDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2020

09.00-09.05      **Recap of first day by the Chair, H.E. Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief**

09.05-10.00      **Special Session: Connecting the Dots**

Dr. Azza Karam, Coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development and Secretary General-elect of World Conference of Religions for Peace

H.E. Mr. Faisal bin Abdulrahman bin Muaammar, Secretary General, Centre for Interreligious Dialogue (KAICIID)

Mr. Kishan Manocha, Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

Mr. Jeroen Schokkenbroek, Director of Anti-Discrimination, Council of Europe

Ms. Erin Morriss, Deputy Head of Mission, New Zealand Embassy to the Netherlands

10.00-12.00      **‘Marketplace’**

Poster display and various presentations in separate rooms

Morning tea will be available during the Marketplace

10.30-11.15      **Side Event Presentation on Gender, Religion and Freedom of Religion and Belief issues:**

Dr. Azza Karam, Coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development and Secretary General-elect of World Conference of Religions for Peace

12.00-13.30      **Lunch**

13.30 – 16.00      **Plenary**

Reporting back from the break out groups by break-out group rapporteur followed by an open discussion chaired by H.E. Jos Douma, Special Envoy for Religion and Belief

Annex II

List of organisations participating in the marketplace

- Academie van de Stad
- A Common World Among the Youth (ACWAY)
- Anne Frank House
- ARTICLE 19
- Freedom of Religion or Belief Learning Platform
- Humanist International
- Humanistisch Verbond (Humanistic Association Netherlands)
- MO & MOOS
- Police for all
- Saïd en Lody
- TellIMAMA
- The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights





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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
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