Proposed ‘stock-taking’ meeting on progress with the Istanbul Process (draft)

Denmark, European Union and the Universal Rights Group

In cooperation with the ‘Quartet’ (Pakistan, Turkey, UK and US)

Concept note

Background

The main intergovernmental policy framework for combating religious intolerance, stigmatisation, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief is set down in Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 and its sister resolution 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 forwards in international efforts to confront religious intolerance.

The inclusion of an explicit plan of action to combat religious intolerance in the operative paragraphs of these 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 Istanbul, Turkey in July 2011, there have been six expert-level meetings: in Washington (US), London (UK and Canada), Geneva (OIC), Doha (Qatar), Jeddah (OIC), and Singapore.

More than eight years after the adoption of resolution 16/18 and against a worrying backdrop of heightened religious intolerance worldwide (including rising Islamaphobia and anti-Semitism), maintaining consensus around the ‘16/18 framework’ remains of the utmost importance. However, that consensus is also fragile.


The 6th 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 plan of action. The Singapore meeting was also symbolically important because it was the first meeting hosted by a non-Western / non-OIC State.
Proposed Istanbul Process ‘stock-taking’ meeting

Unfortunately, there has been no subsequent Istanbul Process gathering since Singapore.

Moreover, no Western State has hosted a meeting of the Process since Canada and the UK in 2012. This has led some to suggest that the West is not committed to the Process, or to changing national laws and practices in line with the resolutions’ action plan. This in turn makes the maintenance of consensus around current iterations of relevant resolutions (i.e. on combatting religious intolerance) in both Geneva and New York, difficult.

The failure to hold a meeting of the Istanbul Process for the past two-and-a-half years also represents a missed opportunity for States - from all parts of the world. There is evidence at the Council and, most importantly, at national-level, that the 16/18 framework and the Istanbul Process are having an impact – they are changing the way in which governments and other stakeholders understand the problem of religious intolerance, and the ways in which they are seeking to combat it. Meetings of the Istanbul Process are, in principle, an ideal forum through which States can exchange experiences, good practices and results in this regard.

At the UN, States are increasingly referencing the ‘16/18 action plan’ in other thematic and country-specific resolutions. For example, resolution 16/18 and the related (expert-led) Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of incitement to hatred were cited in Council resolution 34/22 on the human rights situation in Myanmar. With the resolution, the Council encouraged Myanmar ‘to increase efforts further to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence in all sectors of society in accordance with resolution 16/18 of 24 March 2011 and the Rabat Plan of Action.’

At national level, case studies gathered through previous meetings of the Istanbul Process, as well as through research projects such as URG’s 2014 global survey of levels of implementation of the 16/18 action plan, suggest that a number of countries (in the West, in the OIC, and across Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe) are reforming domestic laws and practices in line with the 16/18 action plan and the Rabat Plan of Action. It also remains the case that many States maintain a strong political commitment to the Geneva and New York resolutions, recognising their symbolic and practical value.

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1 A/HRC/22/17/Add.4
With these points in mind, it is proposed that on Monday 8 April 2019 the Danish Mission to the UN Office at Geneva, the EU Delegation, and the URG will organise an Istanbul Process ‘stock taking exercise,’ that would seek, inter alia, to:

- 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, about the action plan set down in resolutions 16/18 and 66/167, and about the process of implementation: the Istanbul Process.
- Consider the current status of the Istanbul Process – opportunities and challenges.
- Look back on the 6th meeting of the Process, as well as on earlier meetings, and reflect on lessons learnt.
- Consider a limited number of case studies where States have brought changes in line with the action plan.

Proposed date and venue

Monday, 8 April 2019

Permanent Delegation of the European Union
Rue du Grand-Pré 64
Geneva

Draft agenda

09.30-10.00    Registration

Coffee and croissants

10.00-10.10    Welcome and introduction

H.E. Mr. Walter Stevens, Ambassador, Head of EU Delegation

H.E. Mr. Morten Jespersen, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Denmark

H.E. Mr. Tahir Hussain Andrabi, Ambassador, Acting Permanent Representative of Pakistan
10.00-11.15  
**Panel 1 – The context: UN efforts to combat religious intolerance, hatred, discrimination and stigmatisation**  
*Chair:* Dr. Nazila Ghanea, Associate Professor of International Human Rights Law, University of Oxford  
Mr. Marc Limon, Executive Director, Universal Rights Group  
Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief  
Mr. Andrew Smith, Head of UN Advocacy, Article 19

11.15-11.45  
**Coffee**

11.45-13.00  
**Panel 2 – Recalling the six meetings of the Istanbul Process**  
*Chair:* Dr. Ibrahim Salama, Chief, Human Rights Treaties Branch, OHCHR  
H.E. Ms. Rita French, Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom  
H.E. Ms. Nassima Baghli, Permanent Observer of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation  
H.E. Mr. Kok Jwee Foo, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Singapore  
Mr. Ahmer Bilal Soofi, Lawyer, Founding Head, Research Society of International Law (RSIL) in Pakistan, former member of Human Rights Council Advisory Committee

13.00-14.00  
**Lunch**
14.00-15.45

**Panel 3 – Progress and future challenges: on-the-ground change in line with Council resolution 16/18 and its action plan**

Chair: Ms. Diane Alai, UN Representative Baha’i International

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

Ms. Catherine Newcombe, Department of Justice, United States of America

H.E. Mr. Mehmet Paçaci, Ambassador, Special Representative of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

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

Ms. Christen Broecker, Deputy Director, Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights

Discussants:

Iman Abou Atta, Tell Mama UK

Ms. Liv Kvanvig, Coordinator, International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB)

15.45-16.15

**Coffee**

16.15-16.45

**Wrap-up and next steps**