

**7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process, 18-19 November 2019:  
Combatting religious intolerance: Building inclusive and resilient societies, and  
pushing back against incitement to hatred and violence**

*The Hague, Kingdom of the Netherlands*

**Concept note**

**Background**

The main intergovernmental policy framework for combatting religious intolerance 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 forward. After 65 years of often-difficult debates and negotiations at the UN, 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 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. In April 2019, Denmark and the European Union organised a ‘stock taking’ meeting in Geneva, to discuss progress over the course of those six meetings.

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’) is of the utmost importance.

**6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process, 2016**

The 6<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process can be accessed [here](#).

## **Istanbul Process 'stock-taking' meeting, 2019**

In April 2019, the Danish Mission to the UN Office at Geneva, the Delegation of the European Union (EU) to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva, and the Universal Rights Group (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, about the action plan set down in resolutions 16/18 and 66/167, and about 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 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 on those meetings to emphasize introspection and self-reflection, implementation and impact, and the practical exchange of ideas and experiences. Potential future hosts were also urged to ensure that 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.

### **Concept for the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process**

The 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process will focus on the following broad theme:

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

In line with this broad focus, the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Istanbul Process will cover two main subthemes:

- Pro-active approach: building tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies; and
- Incitement to religious hatred and violence: pushing back.

#### **Pro-active approach: building tolerant, inclusive and resilient societies**

This theme will look 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. It will be premised on the concept of prevention – i.e. on an understanding that it is the steady, daily acts of discrimination and intolerance, the casual comments designed to stigmatise, exclude or marginalise, and the words and actions of politicians and public officials, that cause the fragmentation of society, marginalisation and, ultimately, radicalisation.

Therefore, the best way to combat religious intolerance and hatred is to take a proactive approach to address these phenomena and prevent human rights violations from happening in the first place, by promoting social inclusion, equality and non-discrimination, and by fostering greater understanding between and within communities as well as faiths. Such policies and practices also hold out the potential to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda 'leaving no one behind' (especially SDG16) and to the UN Secretary-General's 'prevention agenda.'

This subtheme would take an inclusive look at government policies and strategies, NGO projects, the work of religious community leaders, inter- and intra-religious dialogue, education (including religious education and human rights education) and awareness-raising.

It would cover the following parts of the 16/18 action plan:

- 5a. Encouraging the creation of collaborative networks to build mutual understanding, promoting dialogue and inspiring constructive action towards shared policy goals and the pursuit of tangible outcomes, such as servicing projects in the fields of education, health, conflict prevention, employment, integration and media education.
- 5c. Encouraging training of government officials in effective outreach strategies;
- 5d. Encouraging the efforts of leaders to discuss within their communities the causes of discrimination, and evolving strategies to counter these causes;
- 5g. Understanding the need to combat denigration and negative religious stereotyping of persons, as well as incitement to religious hatred, by strategizing and harmonizing actions at the local, national, regional and international levels through, *inter alia*, education and awareness-building.
- 5h. Recognizing that the open, constructive and respectful debate of ideas, as well as interfaith and intercultural dialogue at the local, national and international levels, can play a positive role in combating religious hatred, incitement and violence.

### **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 on religious intolerance and discrimination. Over the past decade, this centrality has been further confirmed by the growing use of the Internet and social media. Today, hateful expression or incitement to violence on the basis of religion or belief can and does spread rapidly around the world, sometimes with terrible consequences.

Yet addressing 'hate speech' is also difficult and complex, especially bearing in mind the importance of protecting freedom of expression, both online and offline, and avoiding

undue restrictions. To identify workable solutions, it is important to bring together and work with all relevant stakeholders, including governments, companies (including social media companies), religious communities, journalists, civil society, academics and UN experts, to share different perspectives and exchange good practices. International human rights law, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and other relevant international documents such as Council resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, should be the basis for those discussions and exchanges.

This subtheme would also look at the importance of political and other leaders (e.g. religious community leaders) 'leading by example' by: a) not themselves inciting hatred and violence, and b) speaking out quickly and in a coordinated manner in response to acts of violence in the name of religion. Linked with this, the subtheme would also consider the importance of policymakers and social media companies working together to combat incitement to hatred or violence on-line; and of media professionals acting responsibly and not - wittingly or unwittingly - perpetuating stereotypes, repeating/echoing 'hate speech', or giving prominence to those responsible for acts of violence. Finally, this subtheme would also consider the progress made in implementing the Rabat Plan of Action, including the sharing of national experiences in removing so-called 'blasphemy laws' from the statute book.

The subtheme would cover the following parts of the 16/18 action plan:

- 5a. (See above).
- 5e. Speaking out against intolerance, including advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.
- 5f. Adopting measures to criminalize incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief.
- 5g. (See above).

## Participation

The 7<sup>th</sup> meeting will aim to be truly inclusive - bringing together all of those groups whose support and involvement will be crucial if we are to prevent and stamp out acts of religious intolerance and hatred. This should include:

- High-level government representatives from a limited selection of OIC, Western and other States with a key role in the process.
- High-level speakers from OHCHR, the Human Rights Council, the wider UN, OIC, EU, etc.
- Expert-level participants from interested UN member States (around 100 States to be invited based on list of countries that are currently, or have been, a member of the Human Rights Council, plus non-members that have engaged on this issue). States will each be invited to send a maximum of two participants who are practitioners involved in domestic policies and practices. A 'practitioner' might be, for example: a capital-based government expert or relevant envoy, a

representative of a national law enforcement agency, a religious leader, a community leader, a representative from a domestic NGO, an academic, or a member of a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI).

- Relevant UN Special Rapporteurs (e.g. freedom of religion, freedom of expression, extreme poverty).
- Faith and religious community leaders, covering all major faiths and, ideally, each world region.
- Civil society (especially domestic civil society) - NGOs involved in projects to combat religious intolerance, hatred, incitement, etc.
- Relevant businesses (e.g. Facebook, Twitter).
- Journalists/media professionals (in their capacity as relevant stakeholders).

It is expected that there will be around 150 participants in total. Please note that to allow for free-flowing and inclusive discussion the meeting will operate under the Chatham House rule.

Limited financial support (for travel, accommodation and travel insurance) will be made available to:

- representatives of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) – maximum one per country;
- representatives of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) – maximum one per country; and
- expert speakers from civil society.