

26 February 2024

Open Letter to the Ambassadors of Member States of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to the UN Human Rights Council:

Excellencies,

Our organisations write to you to express our support and to appeal for a regular technical rollover of the upcoming resolution on “combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief”, seen as a renewal of Resolution 16/18, at the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council. This session should be an opportunity to encourage all States to reaffirm commitment to the implementation of Resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, including through the reinvigoration of the Istanbul Process.

We are dismayed over [the rise of discrimination and violence against persons on the basis of their religion or belief](#) worldwide. Any act of religious hatred is abhorrent and intimidates religious minorities into silence. We believe [open space for dialogue, debate, and dissent is key to preventing this hate](#), by allowing it to be challenged online and offline. We underline that [the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of religion or belief, and equality are mutually dependent and reinforcing](#).

In 2011, the Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 16/18, a universally agreed upon framework to address the root causes of hate based on religion or belief in law, policy, and practice. The resolution – rooted in a speech on religious intolerance given by the then Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation – has provided a holistic action plan that has driven forward action on tackling hate speech and discrimination at the national level. We believe Resolution 16/18 strikes the right balance and continues to be the most constructive way out of previously divisive debates. Promoting diversity, inclusion, and pluralism over censorship is fundamental to challenge deep-seated prejudices that drive hate against religious groups and individuals. While new challenges have emerged since the adoption of Resolution 16/18, we fundamentally believe that this framework is as relevant as ever and provides answers in our fight against religious hate.

Resolution 16/18 is a landmark achievement of the Human Rights Council and a testament to its ability to find consensual solutions to universal problems. We fear that reopening the text to make any substantive change to the framework – particularly through the introduction of human rights-incompatible language on the “defamation of religions” or other undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression – would severely risk undermining the delicate consensus and will threaten our ability to respond to rising levels of hate against persons on the basis of their religion or belief worldwide. [As raised recently by multiple UN Special Rapporteurs](#), we note that prohibitions on blasphemy are regularly used to facilitate discrimination and violence against religious or belief minorities and fuel division by denying groups already at risk of discrimination the opportunity to speak or be heard. This is of particular concern given the rise of political parties and groups spreading intolerance worldwide, who could be empowered by any international standards on blasphemy to deny minorities their right to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.

When it comes to the limits of the right to freedom of expression, the Rabat Plan of Action sets out clear guidance on the exceptional circumstances in which the most severe forms of hate speech should be prohibited, particularly advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to hostility, discrimination or violence. It also sets out positive policy measures to address the root causes of hate, and the various stakeholders that must be engaged in order to counter it, making it an important companion to Resolution 16/18.

Despite Resolution 16/18 providing a pathway to tackling religious hate, we have seen a disappointing waning of political commitment and a lack of implementation over recent years. The [Istanbul Process, a series of meetings to promote and guide implementation of the Resolution 16/18](#), has a huge potential to drive forward our efforts to turn the tide on religious intolerance. In the past, including the 8th Istanbul Process led by Pakistan in 2022, this forum has provided the space for various stakeholders – from government ministries, to religious leaders, to social media companies – to exchange good practices and experiences at getting to the root causes of hate in societies.

We call on the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to work with other delegations and civil society at the session to:

- Present a technical rollover of the upcoming resolution on “combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence

against, persons based on religion or belief”, ensuring no substantive changes are made to this consensual framework;

- Reaffirm and encourage commitment to Resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action and adopt comprehensive and evidence-based national implementation plans, with the full and effective participation of diverse stakeholders; and,
- Reinvigorate the Istanbul Process and ensure the process is cross-regional, participatory, practitioner-oriented, and inclusive of key stakeholders, including national government ministries and agencies, national human rights institutions, legislators, judiciary, national and regional civil society, religious and community leaders, journalists and media workers, and social media and internet companies.

We would welcome more discussions on how to harness Resolution 16/18 to respond to the growing discrimination and violence against persons on the basis of their religion or belief worldwide.

Signed by:

Amnesty International

ARTICLE 19

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

CIVICUS

CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide)

Human Rights Watch

Humanists International

International Bar Association’s Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)

The Center for Reproductive Rights