**A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief (Draft)**
**Countering Hate Speech: Role of Religion and Culture**
October 12, 2020


**Hate Speech: A Global Phenomenon that demands collaboration and engagement of religious and non-religious leaders**

In a continuously globalising reality, hate speech has increasingly become a powerful factor in the spread of misinformation that aggravates prejudice, and spurs and heightens discriminatory practices, through deliberately hateful messages. A broad spectrum of practices and crafted messages stigtamise disadvantaged and vulnerable communities and individuals, creating a climate of fear, rejection, and exclusion amongst them. This threatens societal values and human rights. Religious and sectarian identities have been used as a focus of hate speech against certain groups and individuals, undermining the values of cultural and religious tolerance, diversity, and pluralism. Different politicians have used hate speech to promote specific political agendas, especially during elections or transitional periods. Disseminating hate speech can lead to incitement to violence, and both undermine the basic human right of religious freedom and belief. There are some challenges to addressing hate speech, particularly difficulties surrounding its definition but still more with tension between hate speech and freedom of expression.

Engaging religious actors and policy makers in combating hate speech is a priority concern of the G20 Interfaith Forum. G20 religious leaders and institutions, including leading interreligious bodies, are engaging with international and national policymakers to counter hate speech but there far more action and partnerships are needed. By increasing mutual support through engagement, understanding, harmonisation, and coordination of efforts, the impact of efforts to tackle this global challenge can be far greater. The topic merits specific attention and strategic reflection by the G20 leaders at their Summit.


**Hate Speech: Definition, Triggers and Forms**

There is no widely accepted international legal definition of hate speech, and the characterization of what is 'hateful' is often controversial and disputed. The 2019 UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech[1] provides a well respected definition: hate speech is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, including their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.

Hate speech can take various forms, including political speeches and flyers, media content, social media communications and visual arts products. Hate speech can incite or contribute to violence. Factors involved here can include a context conducive to violence, an influential speaker, a speech that is widely disseminated, involving a receptive audience, and singling out a specific target. The "target" is usually an individual or group of a specific ethnic, national, religious, political, sexual orientation or gender identity. Hate speech is involved when there is deliberate intent and a demonstrable desire on the part of the speaker to advocate violence and a certain degree of likelihood that the act in question may lead to the violence that it advocates.


**International Landscape in Countering Hate Speech.**

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[1] "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech", May 2019
https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf

The issue of hate speech is not new, and a trajectory of international efforts have sought approaches and actions to counter hate speech. The following examples are a selected sample that highlights important aspects of the evolution of the international landscape.

Rather than prohibiting hate speech as such, international law prohibits the incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence (referred to here as 'incitement'). Incitement is a very dangerous form of speech because it explicitly and deliberately aims at triggering discrimination, hostility, and violence, which may also lead to terrorism or atrocity crimes. International law does not requires States to prohibit hate speech that does not reach the level of incitement. To varying degrees, States have developed their own national legislation that provides specific parameters, tailored to the national context and to the national levels of protection of freedom of expression, to define which instances of hate speech shall be criminalized, and identifying specific mechanisms (judicial or quasi-judicial) for enforcing such legislation.

Hate speech is not confined to a single region nor is it focused on a single religion or culture. In September 2019, 26 UN human rights experts collectively raised concerns about the global scope of the phenomenon.[2]

The international community has over the past decade stepped up its response to the rise of hate speech. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has facilitated global consultations that led to the 2013 Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.[3] The Plan aims to provide guidance on how to balance the respective provisions of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides for freedom of expression, and Article 20, which prohibits incitement of discrimination, hostility, or violence.

Between 2015 and 2016, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, with support from the International Centre for interreligious and intercultural dialogue (KAICIID), held a series of consultations with religious leaders, faith-based, secular and regional organizations, as well as subject matter experts from all regions, which resulted in the 'Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes'. The Plan of Action contains three main clusters of recommendations addressed to States as well as to non-State actors, including religious leaders.

In a similar approach, the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthen their cooperation with a particular focus on combatting hate speech and disinformation while preserving freedom of expression and promoting gender equality in their 3rd Policy Dialogue on Human Rights held on 27 November 2019 in Brussels, Belgium.[4]

The No Hate Speech Movement[5], a youth campaign led by the Council of Europe Youth Department, has taken steps to mobilise young people to combat hate speech and promote human rights online. Launched in 2013, it was rolled out at the national and local levels through national campaigns in 45 countries and has remained active through the work of various national campaigns, online activists, and other partners.

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[2] See the open letter of 26 UN Human Rights Council Special Procedures, dated 23 September 2019. The UN has also adopted a specific action plan on its role in countering hate speech:
https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/UN%20Strategy%20and%20Plan%20of%20Action%20o n%20Hate%20Speech%2018%20June%20SYNOPSIS.pdf

[3] See https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/RabatPlanOfAction.aspx.

[4] https://asean.org/asean-hold-3rd-human-rights-policy-dialogue/?highlight=hate%20speech

[5] https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation OIC, in partnership with KAICIID International Dialogue Centre, through an international conference in Jakarta, 2019, gathered political decision-makers and religious leaders from different communities in Southeast Asia to enrich intercultural dialogue, enhance interreligious and intercultural understanding, as well as combat hatred, intolerance, violence, and terrorism in Southeast Asia[6].

**Religious community initiatives to address hate speech**

The KAICIID Dialogue Centre has taken an active role in addressing the global challenge of hate speech, convinced that religious leaders and policy makers can and should play significant roles in countering hate speech. The initiatives focus on purposeful engagement, efforts to enhance understanding, and harmonisation and coordination of efforts. This has helped to increase the impact of common efforts to tackle this global challenge. In an unprecedented demonstration of multi-religious solidarity, leaders of Christian, Muslim and other religious communities from the Middle East region jointly issued the Vienna Declaration[7], "United against Violence in the Name of Religion", at the international conference organized by the KAICIID Dialogue Centre on 19 November 2014. This was the first time that religious leaders representing so many different religions from a crisis region had come together as one to denounce oppression, marginalization, persecution and killing of people in the name of religion. More recently, on 30-31 October 2019, in Vienna, religious actors, policy makers and media representatives from various regions joined the KAICIID conference "The Power of Words: The Role of Religion, Media and Policy in Countering Hate Speech", which resulted in the adoption of a set of compelling recommendations on how to prevent and counter hate speech.

In 2017 the scholars of the University of al Azhar, the main theological-academic center of Sunni Islam, submitted the text of a bill to the offices of the Presidency of the Egyptian Republic to counter violence and sectarian hate propaganda and reduce hate speech justified in the name of religion.[8] In the drafting of the bill, members of the Committee took into account universal reference texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the Egyptian Constitution and the provisions of criminal law in force in Egypt. The bill avoids entering into the details of the individual penalties to be imposed on those responsible for instigating religious hatred and crimes related to it, which will be specified by the judicial authority. The initiative has the explicit goal of distancing from al Azhar theories and propaganda that in parts of the Islamic community justify hate and violence by citing the Koran and drawing on religious teachings and texts.

Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayeb, in February 2020, asked UN Secretary General António Guterres to declare 4th February World Day of Human Fraternity[9].[10] The request was made by members of a High Committee set up for to put into effect the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace signed by Pope Francis and Ahmed Al-Tayyeb on February 4th 2019 during the Pope's trip to the Arab Emirates. The request also called on the United Nations to participate, together with the Holy See and Al-Azhar, in the organisation, in the near future, of a World Summit on Human Fraternity. The Secretary General appointed Adama Dieng, his Special Adviser on Hate Speech and the Prevention of Genocide, as the UN representative to follow the proposed activities and work with the Committee.

In Myanmar, Interfaith Dialogue for Peace, Harmony and Security is an important initiative bringing together religious leaders. It enables dialogue, while symbolically showing that coexistence is

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[6] https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=23013&t_ref=13863&lan=en

[7] https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/vienna-declaration-united-against-violence-name-religion

[8] http://www.fides.org/en/news/62525-AFRICA_EGYPT_Al_Azhar_presents_a_bill_against_those_who_use_religion_to_justify_violence_and_hate_campaigns

[9] http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Vatican-and-Al-Azhar-propose-a-Day-of-Human-Fraternity-to-the-UN-48738.html

[10] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

possible.[11] The initiative convened in July 2017 135 religious leaders and scholars from 32 countries in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture with assistance from the Japan foundation, the Vivekananda foundation from India, and the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Myanmar ISIS). The state media reported that the dialogue meeting highlighted the common goal as nothing but peace, stability, and security of the human world, noting that the contemporary world lacks peace, security and stability because of variegated political, racial and religious conflicts.

In 2018, UNESCO and ODIHR produce Guidelines for Policymakers to take up the challenge of educating learners to resist contemporary anti-Semitism at a time when the issue is becoming ever more acute around the world. It suggests concrete ways to address anti-Semitism, counter prejudice and promote tolerance through education, by designing programmes based on a human rights framework, global citizenship education, inclusiveness, and gender equality. It also provides policymakers with tools and guidance to ensure that education systems build the resilience of young people to anti-Semitic ideas and ideologies, violent extremism and all forms of intolerance and discrimination, through critical thinking and respect for others.[12]

*Focus areas to counter hate speech include the role of religious leaders and FBOs; policy makers; media practitioners and educators:*

 (I) strategies & perspectives of religious leaders in countering hate speech and the mechanism of coordination, cooperation, and joint efforts amongst religious leaders in this regard, (II) the role of state actors & policymakers and the crucial role that political culture has in the prevention of hate speech, by developing a culture of human dignity, solidarity, and living together amidst diversity, (III) the roles religious institutions & faith-based organizations play in countering hate speech and stopping the misuse of religion to discriminate against others and/or legitimize violence, (IV) responsibility of media outlets, practitioners and journalists to in preventing hate speech and promoting peaceful coexistence and social cohesions, (V) the role of interreligious education as an effective tool to convey messages about dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity.

**Main Challenges in addressing hate speech including religious leader roles**

Various challenges face organisations and individuals in countering hate speech. Institutional factors such as the legal frameworks, education, and media are the main factors. These contribute to shaping public perceptions towards vulnerable groups, including women, refugees, and ethnic and religious minorities, who are the main targets of hate speech.

- *Legal frameworks.* Although many countries have laws against hate speech, definitions vary significantly. The Law Commission Report says, "The analysis of hate speech in different countries suggests that despite not having a general definition, it has been recognised as an exception to free speech by international institutions and municipal courts."[13] However, according to the OSCE 2018 Hate Crime Data report[14] there is a gap between the existing laws and practice. This gap often prevents victims from reporting hate crimes to law enforcement

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[11] http://www.mizzima.com/news-domestic/interfaith-dialogue-peace-harmony-and-security-world-held-yangon

[12] Published in 2018 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ("OSCE"), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights ("ODIHR"), 2018 UNESCO ISBN 978-92-3-100274-8

[13] Observer Research Foundation. Encouraging Counter-Speech by Mapping the Contours of Hate Speech on Facebook in India ISBN: 978-93-87407-91-6, 2018.

[14] https://hatecrime.osce.org/sites/default/files/documents/Website/Infographics/2018-key-findin_updated%20Feb%202020.pdf

authorities, which can result in injustices in modern societies. Different regions, including the Arab region, need constitutional provisions and legal procedures to tackle and counter hate speech and maintain universal human rights standards within their countries, as well as engage international institutions in countering hate speech.

Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolution 16/18 addresses 'combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief", and was adopted by consensus in March 2011. It is widely regarded as a landmark achievement of the HRC's first decade. However, the '16/18 framework' remains fragile. Rather than working together to implement the 16/18 action plan, States have regularly returned to pre-2011 arguments over the nature of the problem, the correct role of the international community, and whether the solution to intolerance lies in strengthening the enjoyment of fundamental human rights or in setting clearer limits thereon. These divisions have re-emerged, in large part, because of conceptual confusion among policymakers about what the implementation of resolution 16/18 means in practice and what it entails. There has been a related sense that Istanbul Process meetings have lost touch with their original objective and focus: to provide a space for practitioners, domestic experts, community groups, etc. to share experiences and good practices. [15]

- *Education.* Work done at the Council of Europe reveals a lack of awareness among educators of the importance of developing digital citizenship competences for the well-being of young people[16], and that there is a need to review how schools' curricula address interreligious and intercultural diversity. Moreover, adults should be targeted by education programmes along with those already designed for young people. On a different level, an essential challenge in promoting interreligious education to counter hate speech is to provide fair and affordable access to education in many parts of the world. This challenge exists in regions where education is still a privilege for many people, particularly vulnerable groups including women and refugees. In short, changemaking is a very long and difficult process that requires changing programmes as well as training teachers.

- *Media.* The misuse of traditional and social media is an enormous factor in spreading hate speech. While it is important to uphold media freedom commitments while countering 'harmful content'[17], traditional and social media platforms need to become more creative spaces that promote tolerance and diversity rather than hate and conflict. Digital technology has enabled the media to reach audiences never reached before and has given rise to unreliable "citizen journalists" who use social media to influence others' opinions and perceptions. Sometimes audiences want editors and journalists to spread negative messages. Because some media outlets disseminate radical views on issues related to faith, religious leaders need to learn more about online strategies to share messages that tackle hate speech from a religious perspective. For example: In parts of the Arab region, some religious leaders incite hate speech and are thus part of the problem. The media has also played a direct role in inciting hatred between candidates during elections in many parts of the world. In addition, politicians have used media to incite hate speech against refugees to divert the public's attention from the root causes of economic difficulties.

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[15] Meeting Report, 6th Meeting of the Istanbul Process, 2016

https://www.universal-rights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Meeting_Istanbul_Process_Singapore_2017_spread_low_res.pdf

[16] https://theewc.org/ewc-contributed-to-unesco-expert-meeting-preparing-the-global-education-ministers-conference/

[17] Annual Central Asia Media Conference, OSCE, October 2020

**Recommendations**

The 2019 UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech and on the Power of Words conference on countering hate speech provides a sound set of recommendations that address the root causes, drivers and actors involved in hate speech. The plan of action points to ways to strengthen collaboration and partnerships among religious leaders and policy makers, activate existing networks and agreements, engage and support the victims of hate speech, build capacities of individuals and organisations, use education and technology as tools for addressing hate speech, and advocate for countering hate speech at regional and international levels.

International organisations, FBOs, religious leaders and Policy makers should pursue the following approaches to enhance their impact on hate speech:

*To promote collaboration and international networking, religious communities should:*

  a. Encourage religious leader and institution partnerships with media to counter hate speech;
  b. Document and share best practices including historical accounts of efforts and initiatives in countering hate speech;
  c. Design programmes for youth that promote common values, in collaboration with the UN system;
  d. Establish an interfaith social media campaigns to ensure religiously diverse role models;
  e. Launch an award programme to encourage organisations and individuals who work against hate speech.

*To build capacities for identifying and countering hate speech, interreligious bodies should :*

  a. Train religious leaders and journalists on responding to hate speech on social media;
  b. Train young people and empower them to take initiative and share positive messages and that tackle hate speech on social media.
  c. Train people working in different organizations FBOs and NGOs especially those working with vulnerable groups to raise public awareness on the hate speech presence in society.

*To build knowledge and increase sharing of information, interreligious bodies should:*

  a. Research, document, and monitor relevant statistics on hate speech incidents;
  b. Map out existing initiatives that counter hate speech at international and regional levels to maximise efforts and resources;
  c. Develop a code of ethics for journalists and social media to prevent/counter hate speech;
  d. Implement reflective learning practices in formal and non-formal education settings;
  e. Create a platform and global institution for exchanging ideas on moderation and dialogue and working together to define hate speech.

*Dialogue practitioners, religious leaders, and faith-based organisations should:*

  a. Support governments in producing guidelines for curricula on common citizenship values and ethics;
  b. Educate and raise public awareness about the important of countering hate speech.
  c. Advocate for rules, regulations, and legal measures that prevent discrimination against the OSCE's nine identified vulnerable groups and ensure equal citizenship for all, regardless of faith;
  d. Reach out to decision-makers at the policy level and encourage policymakers to adopt relevant laws to counter hate speech while ensuring the right balance between freedom of expression and hate speech.

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