

A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief
Countering Hate Speech: Roles of Religion and Culture
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Hate Speech: A Global Phenomenon that demands collaboration and engagement of religious and non-religious leaders

Hate speech has become an increasingly powerful factor, its significance magnified by the interconnections of globalization and the ubiquity of social media. The deliberate diffusion of misleading and demeaning information aggravates prejudice against individuals or communities, and spurs and heightens discriminatory practices, both of which can contribute to incitements to violence.ⁱ A broad spectrum of practices and crafted messages stigmatise disadvantaged and vulnerable communities and individuals, fomenting a climate of fear, rejection, and exclusion amongst them. Politicians in diverse settings have used hate speech to promote specific political agendas, especially during elections or transitional periods.

Though the dangers and harms associated with hate speech are widely recognized, addressing it presents complex challenges. These include difficulties in defining hate speech in law and social consensus, but still more because of tensions between efforts to control or limit hate speech and the important rights to freedom of expression.

Hate speech targets many different groups but religious and sectarian identities are commonly a focus of hate speech, singling out certain groups and individuals, and thus undermining the values of cultural and religious tolerance, diversity, and pluralism. Hate speech is a fundamental threat to societal values and human rights. Hate speech undermines human rights, including freedom of religion and belief.

Engaging religious actors and policy makers in addressing and countering 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 this end, but further 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 of collaborative actions and specific cooperation with religious institutions thus 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 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 Speechⁱⁱ 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. Of note, this definition is not a legal but a working one. Indeed, hate speech is not defined in international law and the definition developed by the United Nations aims to facilitate the work of practitioners dealing with this issue, but not to imply a specific set of standards or features.

Hate speech can take various forms, including political speeches and flyers, media content, social media communications, and visual and other arts products. In its different forms, it can

incite or contribute to discrimination, hostility and violence. The impact of specific hate speech varies, with for example a context conducive to violence, an influential speaker, a speech that is widely disseminated, involving a receptive audience, or singling out a specific target playing roles. The “target” is usually an individual or group of a specific ethnic, national, religious, political, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Three levels of hate speech are significant: lawful, unlawful, and incitement. For the least severe forms of hate speech, which is lawful, non-legal responses are encouraged. Such instances include expressions that are offensive, shocking, or disturbing, denial of historical crimes of genocide (in many settings), or blasphemous speech. Levels considered intermediate may be prohibited under international law, even if they do not reach the threshold of incitement, if restrictions are provided by law and are deemed necessary in a democratic society and proportionate, and if they pursue a legitimate aim, including respect of the rights of others such as the right to equality and non-discrimination, or the protection of public order. Forms of hate speech that involve direct and public incitement to genocide, or any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence is prohibited under international law.ⁱⁱⁱ

International Landscape in Countering Hate Speech.

The issue of hate speech is not new, and a trajectory of international efforts can be traced that have sought effective 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.

International law prohibits the incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence (referred to here as ‘incitement’) rather than prohibiting hate speech as such. Incitement is a dangerous form of speech that explicitly and deliberately aims at triggering discrimination, hostility, and violence, which may also lead to terrorism or atrocity crimes. As hate speech is not defined in international law, there is no broad international guidance to deal with it. To varying degrees, States have developed their own national legislation that provides specific parameters tailored to the national context and to the national legislation and norms for protection of freedom of expression, that define which instances of hate speech shall be prohibited and sometimes criminalised, and identifying specific mechanisms (judicial or quasi-judicial) for enforcing such legislation. There are many circumstances, however, where national laws are not in line with international human rights law.

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.^{iv} 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. It also introduces the six-step test that helps to identify speech that has reached the threshold of incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence and therefore need to be prohibited. The Rabat Plan of Action states that criminalisation of incitement needs to be the option of last resort and therefore applied only when there is a high likelihood that incitement can lead to 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. This 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 to prevent incitement to violence.

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.^v

The No Hate Speech Movement^{vi}, 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.

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.^{vii}

Religious community initiatives to address hate speech

The KAICIID International Dialogue Centre has taken an active role in addressing hate speech, convinced that religious leaders and actors and policy makers can and should play significant roles in addressing and countering it. The initiatives focus on purposeful engagement with pertinent actors, efforts to enhance understanding, and harmonisation and coordination of efforts. It has helped to increase the impact of common efforts to tackle the 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^{viii}, "United against Violence in the Name of Religion", at the international conference organized by the KAICIID International Dialogue Centre on 19 November 2014. This was the first time that religious leaders and actors 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 compelling set of recommendations on how to prevent and counter hate speech.

In 2017 the scholars of the University of al Azhar, the main theological-academic centre of Sunni Islam, submitted the text of a bill to the offices of the Presidency of the Egyptian Republic aimed at countering violence and sectarian hate propaganda and reducing hate speech justified in the name of religion.^{ix} 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 February 4th an annual World Day of Human Fraternity^{xxi}. A High Committee was set up 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. It also called on the United Nations to participate, together with the Holy See and Al-Azhar, in organising, in the near future, of a World Summit on Human Fraternity. UN Secretary General Guterres appointed Adama Dieng, at the time his Focal Point on Hate Speech and Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide, as the UN representative to follow the proposed activities and work with the Committee.

In Myanmar, an Interfaith Dialogue for Peace, Harmony and Security brings together religious leaders. It supports dialogue, showing symbolically that coexistence is possible.^{xii} 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 produced Guidelines for Policymakers that aim to support resistance to contemporary anti-Semitism at a time when it is increasingly 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 provides policymakers with tools and guidance to help 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 building respect for others.^{xiii}

The guidelines highlight five focus areas to address and counter hate speech, including the role of religious leaders and FBOs; policy makers; media practitioners, and educators:

(I) strategies & perspectives of religious leaders in addressing and 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 leadership has in addressing and countering 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 addressing and 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 addressing and countering 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.

For religious leaders, leading Challenges in addressing hate speech,

Challenges in addressing and countering hate speech include discriminatory public perceptions in some contexts towards women, refugees, and ethnic and religious minorities that derive from

the fear of otherness, or/and from some social norms. Challenging them is a priority. Public perceptions are shaped by many factors including but not limited to legal frameworks, education, and media.

Legal frameworks. Many countries have laws against hate speech, but 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.”^{xiv} Different regions, including the Arab region, need policies 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’. It was adopted by consensus in March 2011 and 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 about 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.^{xv}

Education. Work done at the Council of Europe reveals a lack of awareness among educators of the importance of developing digital citizenship competences that promote the well-being of young people^{xvi}, and highlights the need to review how schools’ curricula address interreligious and intercultural diversity. Moreover, adults need to be targeted by education programmes along with those already designed for young people.

Providing fair and affordable access to education in many parts of the world where education is still a privilege for many people is an essential challenge in promoting interreligious education to address and counter hate speech. This has particular importance for 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. 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’^{xvii}, traditional and social media platforms need to become more creative spaces that promote tolerance and diversity rather than hate and conflict. An example is the 2006 UNESCO Media education kit for teachers, students, parents and professionals, which provides a complex and comprehensive view of media education, encompassing all media, old and new; it seeks new ways in which people can enhance their participation in the political and cultural life of the general community through the media. In particular, it promotes young people’s access to the media, while also increasing their critical appreciation of its activities.^{xviii} 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. Audiences may seek deliberately for 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, notably because some media outlets disseminate radical views on issues related to faith. For example: In parts of the Arab region, some religious leaders use hate speech and incite discrimination, hostility and violence 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.

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 addressing and countering hate speech at regional and international levels.

To promote collaboration and international networking, G20 leaders, working in purposeful collaboration with religious leaders, should support and expand the following activities:

- a. Document and share best practices including historical accounts of efforts and initiatives aimed at countering hate speech;
- b. Design programmes for youth that promote common values, in collaboration with the UN system;
- c. Support governments in producing guidelines for curricula on common citizenship values and ethics;
- d. 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;
- e. Implement reflective learning practices in formal and non-formal education settings;
- f. Create a platform and global institution for exchanging ideas on moderation and dialogue and working together to define hate speech.
- g. Consider launching 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 both traditional and social media;
- b. Train young people and empower them to take initiatives and share positive messages 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.
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- e. Train people working in different organizations, FBOs, and NGOs, especially those working with vulnerable groups to raise public awareness on the presence and impact of hate speech in society.

To build knowledge and increase sharing of information, international organisations including G20 members and engagement groups should provide active support in the following areas:

- a. Religious leader and institutions partnerships with media to counter hate speech;
- b. Interfaith social media campaigns to ensure religiously diverse role models;
- c. Research, documenting, and monitoring relevant statistics on hate speech incidents;
- d. Mapping out existing initiatives that counter hate speech at international and regional levels to maximise efforts and resources;
- e. Engaging decision-makers to advance and advocate policies that address and counter hate speech while ensuring the right balance between freedom of expression and hate speech.
- f. Education that raises public awareness about the important of countering hate speech.

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ⁱ ICCPR Article 20

ⁱⁱ “United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech”, May 2019

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ⁱⁱⁱ International Human Rights Legal and Policy Framework on Hate Speech, Sejal Parmar, 2020

^{iv} See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/RabatPlanOfAction.aspx>.

^v <https://asean.org/asean-hold-3rd-human-rights-policy-dialogue/?highlight=hate%20speech>

^{vi} <https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign>

^{vii} https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=23013&t_ref=13863&lan=en

^{viii} <https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/vienna-declaration-united-against-violence-name-religion>

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^{xvi} <https://theewc.org/ewc-contributed-to-unesco-expert-meeting-preparing-the-global-education-ministers-conference/>

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