



**Cairo Institute**  
for Human Rights Studies  
Institut du Caire pour les études des droits de l'Homme  
مركز القاهرة لدراسات حقوق الإنسان

**UN Human Rights Council - 55th Session**

**Panel discussion on countering religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence**

**Oral Intervention**

**8 March 2024**

**Delivered by Anna Oosterlinck**

## **UN HRC 55: Address root causes of rising religious incitement instead of restricting freedom of speech and belief**

Thank you, Mr. President.

ARTICLE 19 makes this joint statement on behalf of a group of organisations.

We are dismayed over the rise of hatred against persons on the basis of their religion or belief worldwide. This intimidates religious and belief minorities into silence and can create environments conducive to violence. While we recognise that the desecration of holy books may be considered as deeply disrespectful and offensive by many, we are also concerned about how such incidents are instrumentalised globally to restrict the right to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of religion or belief. It is clearer than ever that more must be done to tackle the root causes of religious hatred, in line with international human rights law.

We believe that the international human rights framework already provides a clear pathway to addressing religious hatred. Resolution 16/18 is commendable not only as a testament to our ability to find consensual solutions to universal problems, but for ultimately striking the right response. At its heart, Resolution 16/18 recognises that open space for dialogue, debate, and dissent, including on topics that are controversial, is fundamental to challenging the deep-seated prejudices that drive hate in societies. The Rabat Plan of Action is an important companion to Resolution 16/18, setting out clear guidance on the exceptional circumstances in which States should prohibit advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to hostility, discrimination or violence.

The desecration of holy books must not be used to justify the introduction of prohibitions on blasphemy or so-called “defamation of religions”. These prohibitions, on their face and in their application, violate the right to freedom of opinion and expression, as well as freedom of religion or belief. They fuel division and religious intolerance by shutting down interfaith dialogue, and can also facilitate and legitimise appalling human rights violations against religious and belief minorities.

The restriction of the right to freedom of expression, in isolation, is ineffective in combating religious hatred, and the effective protection and social inclusion of groups at-risk of discrimination and violence requires broader and positive policy measures. This includes the enactment of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and other policies that tackle systemic discrimination against religious and belief minorities, while also ensuring authorities firmly condemn episodes of religious intolerance and help de-escalate tensions.

Instead, what is needed is for all States and other stakeholders to reaffirm their commitment to the implementation of Resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, including through the reinvigoration of the Istanbul Process. Any change to the international human rights framework and the opening up of old divisive debates will only prevent us from uniting against religious hate.

Thank you, Mr. President.

**Signed by:**

- ARTICLE 19
- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
- CIVICUS
- CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide)
- DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)
- Humanists International
- International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)