

ARTICLE 19

6th Session of the Istanbul Process

---

ARTICLE 19 Special Briefing

# Table of Contents

---

Introduction .....	3
What is the Istanbul Process? .....	3
Challenges facing implementation of Resolution 16/18 and the Istanbul Process .....	4
Did the 6th Istanbul Process rise to the challenge? .....	4
What practices were exchanged at the 6th Istanbul Process Session? .....	5
Panel 1: collaborative networks to build mutual understanding, promote dialogue and inspire constructive action towards shared policy goals and the pursuit of tangible outcomes (Para 5a of resolution 16/18).....	5
Panel 2: promoting open, constructive and respectful debate of ideas (Para 5h of resolution 16/18), and on speaking out against intolerance, including advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence (Para 5e of resolution 16/18).....	6
Enhancing the Istanbul Process as a catalyst for action .....	7
1. Lead by example .....	7
2. Promote visibility, transparency and inclusivity in the Istanbul Process .....	8
3. Enhance introspection in the Istanbul Process and encourage replication of good practice.....	8
4. Maintain consensus on resolution 16/18 and enhance reporting on implementation.....	8
Read more: .....	9

# Introduction

---

On 20 - 21 July, the 6th Session of the Istanbul Process took place in Singapore, aiming to provide “a cross-regional perspective on best practices and policies for promoting religious tolerance and strengthening resilience.”

Compared to previous sessions, the Singapore meeting made progress towards embedding a more practical focus on implementing UN Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution 16/18 on combatting religious intolerance. It featured concrete exchanges of positive policy actions to address the root causes of this phenomenon, demonstrating a way forwards for a process that has faced difficulties.

**ARTICLE 19 calls on all stakeholders to build on this progress to ensure the Istanbul Process becomes a catalyst for action to implement resolution 16/18; to promote tolerance and inclusion, and end violence and discrimination based on religion or belief.**

## What is the Istanbul Process?

---

The Istanbul Process is a series of inter-governmental meetings, initiated in 2011, to encourage and guide the implementation of the 2011 HRC resolution 16/18 on “Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief.”

Resolution 16/18 is a consensus-based commitment for states to address intolerance, violence and discrimination on the basis of religion through an eight-point action plan. It emphasises the primacy of positive policy measures (rather than restrictive laws) to open space for debate, and is premised on the need to universally promote and protect the rights freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, and non-discrimination. [Subsequent resolutions](#) have been adopted at the HRC (most recently [HRC res 31/26](#)), and parallel resolutions containing the same plan of action have been adopted annually at the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

The Istanbul Process was initiated following a ministerial meeting held in Istanbul in 2011, with sessions of the process then hosted by the USA (Washington DC, 2011), the UK and Canada (London, 2012), Qatar (Doha, 2014), and by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Geneva, 2013 and Jeddah, 2015).

An ARTICLE 19 briefing (in [EN](#) | [FR](#) | [AR](#)) released in March 2016 highlights states’ commitments in resolution 16/18, emphasising the importance of the Istanbul Process to implementation. It recommends the [OHCHR’s Rabat Plan of Action](#) for its guidance to states, in particular for the commitment to “criminalise incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief” (para. 5f of resolution 16/18). The Rabat Plan of Action proposes a threshold test for limitations on such expression, in line with international human rights law, making clear that restrictions must aim to protect individuals from violence or discrimination, rather than protect religions or beliefs as such from criticism or ridicule. This remains a point of contention within the Istanbul Process that has at times stalled progress.

# Challenges facing implementation of Resolution 16/18 and the Istanbul Process

---

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein warned in June 2016 that "[hate is being mainstreamed](#)", and that this has been worsened by governments clamping down on the space for civil society and others to counter this hatred. The High Commissioner's assessment demonstrates that the action promised in resolution 16/18 is needed more now than ever, but that the Istanbul Process is yet to mobilise states to deliver it.

Opening the 5th Session of the Istanbul Process in Jeddah in 2015, Zeid challenged all stakeholders to make the process more effective in delivering change. He called for a greater focus on implementation at the national level, urging states to engage in good-faith dialogue with greater introspection on local challenges and self-criticism; he called for concreteness, with an emphasis on sharing practical experience from across all regions to drive towards action. To ensure progress made is built upon, he recommended efforts to ensure greater continuity between meetings, and leadership from states in taking the Istanbul Process forwards. He additionally urged states to regularly report on implementation to OHCHR and the Secretariat.

[ARTICLE 19 has also advocated](#) that the Istanbul Process should become a truly cross-regional, inclusive and participatory forum for exchanging and replicating best practices to implement resolution 16/18. This presupposes a commitment to transparency in all stages of the Istanbul Process.

## Did the 6th Istanbul Process rise to the challenge?

---

The proactive engagement in the 6th Istanbul Process Session of participants from a diverse range of states demonstrated that violence and discrimination based on religion or belief are global phenomena, with resolution 16/18 providing a universal and practically relevant framework for addressing those challenges.

It was significant that this was the first Istanbul Process Session to be hosted in South East Asia, and the first to be hosted in a state belonging to neither the OIC nor the "Western Group of States", as it is between these two groups where political and ideological differences have been most pronounced. The exchange of experiences between practitioners from Argentina, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, the United Kingdom, the United States was largely positive.

By remaining mostly practical and introspective, the 6th Session of the Istanbul Process succeeded where previous meetings have failed. It largely avoided entering politicised and divisive debates, in particular on the scope of the right to freedom of religion or belief and permissible limitations on freedom of expression; it thus avoided descending into some states accusing others of "double standards" while objecting to any scrutiny of their own national records.

Through the participation of practitioners and focus on their experience, the Session featured more attention to the implementation of policy measures at the national and local levels than at some previous Istanbul Process sessions. This was reinforced through site visits to a "Harmony Centre" in An-Nahdah Mosque and a walk-around of Ang Mo Kio Town, to further evaluate the impact of Singapore's policies, providing the basis for comparative discussions.

However, several challenges remain. The lack of transparency leading into the 6th Istanbul Process Session meant a missed opportunity to broaden stakeholder engagement in the implementation of resolution 16/18, in particular among national and regional civil society organisations. It also limited outside scrutiny of the process.

The number and diversity of practitioner participants could have been improved, addressing in particular the underrepresentation of women across the board (two of 15 speakers were women), and the absence of essential stakeholders who were often spoken about but not heard from: national human rights institutions, legislators, judiciary, national and regional human rights organisations (including those advocating for the rights of religion or belief minorities or marginalised groups), journalists and media workers, social media and internet companies, and political parties. Most state representatives were Singapore-based diplomats and therefore not experienced in the implementation of policies relevant to resolution 16/18. This deficiency limited proactive experience sharing among those closest to practice, and limited constructively critical interactions.

The broad dissemination of the information and experiences shared at the 6th Istanbul Process Session will be essential to address deficiencies in transparency and ensure a “feedback loop” to the UN political discussions on enhancing implementation. However, given the limited number of Geneva-based diplomats directly engaged in the meeting, and the absence of representatives from the OHCHR and of relevant UN special procedures, ensuring this feedback loop will be challenging as there is no official outcome document.

Of the next steps discussed during the final session, there was broad support for establishing a “community of practice” to take forward implementation of resolution 16/18 between Sessions, to widen participation, and to establish an online hub for the dissemination and exchange of relevant information and resources. This would help serve the goal of continuity and galvanising the replication of concrete actions, including through regional and bilateral initiatives. Leadership and the allocation of adequate resources will be required to ensure this happens.

## What practices were exchanged at the 6th Istanbul Process Session?

---

The opening of the 6th Istanbul Process Session included [an address from Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman](#) (the only public document from the meeting) and HRC President Ambassador Choi Kyonglim. This was followed by two practitioner-focused panel discussions, the site visits, and a discussion session to identify ways forward.

### **Panel 1: collaborative networks to build mutual understanding, promote dialogue and inspire constructive action towards shared policy goals and the pursuit of tangible outcomes (Para 5a of resolution 16/18).**

The panel highlighted that civil society organisations are leading in innovating good practice and building collaborative networks, and thus it is essential that states provide enabling environments for these independent activities. Bridge Builders in Argentina, Shoulder to Shoulder in the USA, and Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia, were all given as examples of organisations working to build mutual understanding by delivering a wide range of programmes and services.

It was stressed that government-led initiatives and decision-making processes are most effective when they meaningfully include civil society organisations. Several collaborative efforts were cited, including the Committee for Promoting Religious Understanding and Harmony amongst Religious Adherents (JKMPKA) in Malaysia, the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony in Singapore, and the work of the Inter-Religious Council in Sierra Leone. The Inter-Religious Council spoke to its work to address tensions during elections, and its collaboration between religious leaders to commit to a voluntary “code of good conduct”.

Many of these entities also provide or support space for dialogue, conflict resolution, mediation and training for communities at the national as well as local levels. Examples included “neighbourliness” programmes in Malaysia and inter-racial and inter-religious “confidence circles” in Singapore. In the USA, the Communication Relations Service under the Department of Justice offers a wide range of services in this field.

Besides formal inter-faith dialogues, mutual understanding was also effectively built through conscious inter-religious collaborations across other fields where religious identity was incidental. As an example of this, the Inter-Religious Council in Sierra Leone made notable contributions to the peace process and subsequent truth and reconciliation efforts in the country, as well as more recently assisting in the response to the Ebola epidemic. In Argentina, networks of religious leaders have also been called upon to participate in national responses to issues as diverse as financial crises and labour disputes.

Several panellists emphasised that bilateral inter-governmental collaborations had also proven fruitful, with experience-exchanges cited between Indonesia and the UK, and between Argentina and Colombia. Indonesia also cited the Asia-Pacific interfaith and intercultural dialogues as a positive multilateral and multi-stakeholder initiative.

Several participants stressed that initiatives would only succeed if underpinned by strong legal and institutional protection of human rights and equality as part of broader commitments to democracy, inclusion, pluralism and civil society space. The 1964 Civil Rights Act (USA) and its enforcement through the Department of Justice, and the establishment of the National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI) in Argentina, were offered as examples.

Argentina has taken particular efforts to mainstream freedom of religion or belief within the structure of government, including by establishing a Secretariat of Worship within its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with similar initiatives at the city level.

**Panel 2: promoting open, constructive and respectful debate of ideas (Para 5h of resolution 16/18), and on speaking out against intolerance, including advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence (Para 5e of resolution 16/18).**

Civil society led inter-faith dialogue initiatives were cited favourably, with examples including the Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship and the Fostering Inter-Religious Encounters initiative in Malaysia, and the Forum Komunikasi Antar Umat Beragama in Indonesia.

The site visit to the Harmony Centre also reinforced how faith-based organisations can effectively lead inter-faith initiatives and educational programmes to address myths and misperceptions about religions and establish a positive narrative. At several points, it was emphasised that initiatives should proactively establish positive narratives, rather than be in the reactive position of giving “counter-narratives”.

Several participants stressed the importance of mobilising religious leaders and scholars to promote positive messages on tolerance and inclusion. The International Conference of Islamic Scholars in Indonesia and the Religious Rehabilitation Group in Singapore have both relied on the input of religious scholars.

Questions were raised over the effectiveness of governments that seek to establish singular narratives or concepts of “national unity” or “harmony”, which may be used to justify coercive practices to suppress diverse views, including legitimate criticism and dissent.

Providing welcome introspection, the challenges in implementing successful initiatives in Malaysia were addressed in some depth, explaining how preferential status for Malay Muslims under the Constitution, which permeates law and public policy, is the root of tensions exacerbated by an increased “Islamisation” of politics. Though the JKMPKA’s Committee on Issues Among Religious Adherents has established avenues for dialogue on key areas of tension around these issues, reconciling different views has so far proven impossible. Though there are relevant civil society initiatives, others have floundered in this difficult context, such as the Malaysian Bar Council’s attempt to establish an Interfaith Commission.

Use of the internet and social media as positive tools for counter-expression, in particular during times of increasing inter-communal tensions, was also emphasised. In the United Kingdom, following an increase in hate crimes after the “Brexit” vote ([condemned by Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#)), the government supported targeted multi-lingual messaging through social media to give reassurance to communities targeted by hate crimes. There were also online examples of spontaneous and community-organised responses to promote messages of inclusivity and tolerance. The creative use of the Internet by civil society organisations to monitor and counter hatred was also cited, with groups such as True Vision, Tell Mama and the Community Security Trust particularly active. Their efforts to jointly react to incidents with the potential to increase inter-communal tensions, showing solidarity across communities, had also increased resilience against those seeking to exploit such tensions.

Innovations in the private sector to empower users to control the content they see, and to improve processes for reporting and removing content that violates platforms terms of service, were also highlighted. The importance of self-regulation for these platforms, and guarding against undue state interference or pressure on companies to remove lawful content, was also stressed.

Though most discussion focused on positive and preventative measures, legal frameworks that recognise bias-motivation in criminal offences were described as essential. They give full recognition to victims’ and their communities’ experiences, with statistics on crimes being critical to inform public debates and policy responses to discrimination. Perspectives were shared on planned efforts in the United Kingdom to address the challenge of under-reporting of hate crimes, including online public information campaigns, and initiatives to support people who use public transport or work in the night time economy. Data collection in the United Kingdom will also be improved by introducing disaggregated data on religion-motivated offences.

## Enhancing the Istanbul Process as a catalyst for action

---

The concluding segment of the 6th Istanbul Process Session provided an opportunity for participants to share and practically evaluate ideas to further national-level action to implement resolution 16/18.

Drawing upon this discussion, ARTICLE 19 recommends that States:

### 1. Lead by example

- Develop national plans to promote pluralism and mutual understanding in line with resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action, with the full and effective participation of all stakeholders.

- Ensure an enabling environment for robust debate and dialogue, including through a free and open Internet, fully ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression, and non-discrimination.
- Ensure that any domestic prohibitions on incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief comply with the international human rights standards set out in the Rabat Plan of Action.
- Repeal blasphemy laws, in recognition of their incompatibility with international human rights law, and resist attempts to legitimise such measures at the UN or in other fora.

## **2. Promote visibility, transparency and inclusivity in the Istanbul Process**

- Establish a dedicated website for exchanging information and resources on implementation of resolution 16/18, with information on past and upcoming Istanbul Process sessions, as part of efforts to enhance visibility to broader constituencies;
- Build upon cross-regional participation, encouraging more states in underrepresented regions to host and attend Istanbul Process Sessions;
- Broaden participation, ensuring gender diversity and representation of minority religion or belief groups, and engaging practitioners, including from: national government ministries and agencies; national human rights institutions; legislators; judiciary; national and regional human rights organisations; journalists; politicians; and social media and internet companies.
- Ensure an effective “feedback loop” to the UN and political discussions on implementation, with the participation of UN special procedures and OHCHR staff, and cross-regional representation of diplomats to the UN from all regions.

## **3. Enhance introspection in the Istanbul Process and encourage replication of good practice**

- Encourage self-evaluation and self-criticism in contributions to the Istanbul Process, with a focus on lessons-learned and measures to address shortcomings in national policies and practice.
- Explore alternative, participatory and action-oriented formats in the Istanbul Process to enable the identification and replication of good practices on specific aspects of resolution 16/18, and the potential role of different stakeholders.
- Convene national and regional gatherings on implementation of resolution 16/18 under the umbrella of the Istanbul Process, to feed into and enrich annual meetings.
- Dedicate resources to bilateral collaborations to replicate good practice.

## **4. Maintain consensus on resolution 16/18 and enhance reporting on implementation**

- Make high-level commitments to maintaining consensus on resolution 16/18, recognising its potential as a universal and practical framework to promote pluralism and mutual understanding.
- Respond to requests from OHCHR and the Secretary General for information on implementation of resolution 16/18, with detailed evaluations of relevant national actions and policies.
- Move to adopting UN resolutions on the issue of religious intolerance biennially to dedicate more resources to encouraging and periodically measuring implementation of existing commitments.



- Invite all interested stakeholders, including civil society organisations, to submit information on implementation of resolution 16/18.
- Mainstream the Rabat Plan of Action within the Istanbul Process, addressing limitations on freedom of expression through the experience of practitioners in the legal and policy fields.
- Hold states to account for failure to meet the commitments in resolution 16/18 through the use of HRC General Debates, the Universal Periodic Review, and UN special procedures.

## Read more:

---

- ARTICLE 19 statement: [“Implementation of resolution 16/18 is the test of UN HRC's effectiveness”](#)
- ARTICLE 19 briefing: “UN HRC Res 16/18: consolidating consensus through implementation” [EN](#) | [FR](#) | [AR](#)
- Blog-post for the Universal Rights Group: [“Implementing Resolution 16/18: the role of Rabat and the importance of civil society space”](#)