High-Level Forum

Combating Anti-Muslim Discrimination and Hatred

Summary of proceedings

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Sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Canada, the United States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations

Summary

Representatives from government, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, academia, and the private sector gathered at a High Level Forum at the United Nations to discuss ways to combat anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred. Efforts to combat anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred have taken on particular urgency due to growing populism, rising xenophobia, and increasing violent extremism. The meeting follows the September 2016 High Level Forum on Global Antisemitism and reflects the international community's shared concerns over all forms of discrimination and hatred.

A few key themes were discussed throughout the day:

- **There was a clear recognition of the rise of anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred in many parts of the world.** The global migration crisis, the rise of xenophobic movements, identity politics, the spread of violent extremist ideology, and terrorist attacks around the world, along with misinformation and negative stereotypes disseminated through various forms of media, have contributed to the challenge.
- Many speakers underscored the connections between anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred and other forms of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance, including Antisemitism and anti-immigrant discrimination. In discussing possible solutions, **there was broad recognition of the need to address all forms of discrimination and hatred, in particular on the basis of religion or belief, in all parts of the world by applying universal standards to provide equal protection to all individuals.**
- **There was widespread consensus on the need for a concerted effort by all sectors of society to focus on solutions to this growing challenge.** Three expert panels focused on key mechanisms to address this issue: i) Government Policies to Combat Anti-Muslim Discrimination and Hatred; ii) Civil Society Coalition-Building; and, iii) Positive Narratives to Promote Pluralism and Inclusion.

These proceedings offer an abridged summary of contributions to the day. They are meant to briefly present the essence of discussions, and are not exhaustive. For an exhaustive account of the day's discussions, please refer to the video recording at http://webtv.un.org/watch/part-1-high-level-forum-on-combating-anti-muslim-discrimination-and-hatred-no2hatred/5285331909001.

Opening remarks

Addressing the event via video message, **UN Secretary-General António Guterres** welcomed participants to the United Nations, warned against looking for convenient scapegoats in times of insecurity, and called for seeing diversity as a richness instead of a threat – as suggested by the new UN "Together" campaign.

The **EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis,** recalled the importance of laws, political commitment, education, and commitment to the universality of human rights to counter anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred.

Special Adviser to the President of the UN General Assembly Ioannis Vrailas underscored that terrorism could not be associated with any religion, and that fighting anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred required joint and creative efforts through education and states working together with civil society.

David Saperstein, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, took stock of worrying trends worldwide and called on governments to act and protect Muslim populations. He lauded efforts by non-Muslim religious leaders to stand up for Muslims, including with respect to the building of mosques.

Richard Arbeiter, Director General of the Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion at Global Affairs Canada described how anti-discrimination efforts in Canada include highlighting the important contributions and belonging of Muslims to Canada's multicultural society. He encouraged participants to consider the gender-specific aspects of anti-Muslim discrimination.

Finally **Moiz Bokhari, Advisor to the Secretary General of the OIC,** spoke of the manifold drivers of anti-Muslim hatred, including the propagation of negative stereotypes. He also spoke of the OIC's endeavors to address the causes of radicalization, and to promote values of respect, diversity and tolerance.

Panel I: Government policies to combat anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred

Expert representatives from governments and intergovernmental organizations presented various strategies and best practices for combating anti-Muslim discrimination. They noted the particular challenges in dealing with political actors and movements advocating discriminatory and xenophobic policies, and stressed the need to preserve and protect the rule of law and equal rights under the law. UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, a consensus resolution on combating discrimination, intolerance, and violence based on religion or belief, was also noted as providing a practical action plan for governments to address these challenges.

David Friggieri, European Commission Coordinator on Combating anti-Muslim hatred, described his outreach to Muslim civil society and NGOs' main concerns (discrimination in employment, double discrimination against Muslim women, and the disproportionate impact of certain security measures). He presented the Commission's fourfold approach to addressing racism: education, tackling incitement to hatred – particularly online by means of a Code of Conduct agreed with IT companies –, ensuring justice systems take hate crime seriously, and monitoring the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation.

Among other measures, **Dermana Seta, Advisor on Combating Intolerance against Muslims at OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)**, spoke positively of the concept of reasonable accommodation which allows for genuine conversation to take place around the expression of religion and belief. She also highlighted the importance of tackling hate crimes, sharing examples of ODIHR's work, including the training of police, prosecutors and civil society representatives and compiling an annual hate crime report for 57 OSCE participating states. She stated that hate crimes are gendered, targeting men and women differently, for example Muslim women are more likely to be attacked in the streets; she encouraged States to include gender in their official statistics to understand the scope of the problem.

Katarina Stephenson, Governance and Engagement Division Director at the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Canada, described various innovative programs to promote the successful integration of immigrants and refugees to Canada. These include familiarizing newcomers prior to their arrival with Canada's legal framework and with services to facilitate their integration. During the question and answer period, a number of participants commented favorably on the recent appointment of a Somali-born refugee as Canada's new Minister of Immigration.

Eric Treene, Special Counsel for Religious Discrimination at the U.S. Department of Justice, explained the U.S. government found it important to work closely with civil society: first to invite communities to approach law enforcement authorities when discrimination or violence takes place, and second to learn about what happens on the ground in religious communities, since crime victims might report incidents to their imams or community, but not to law enforcement directly.

The panel was moderated by **Arsalan Suleman, Acting Special Envoy to the OIC, U.S. State Department.**

Panel II: Civil society coalition-building

A diverse group of civil society leaders discussed the importance of civil society coalitions to combat discrimination and reinforce societal norms of equality and pluralism. They presented innovative initiatives – including interfaith and interethnic coalitions – to combat hatred against Muslims and members of other groups vulnerable to discrimination. The panel highlighted the vital role played by civil society in building and protecting societal resilience against prejudice and intolerance.

Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign Director Catherine Orsborn said it was essential to set aside important disagreements between religious communities to work on a common agenda. She cited the example of Christian and other denominations speaking out against a proposed "Anti-Foreign Law Bill" in Alabama, which implicitly targeted Muslim communities. More than engaging with hate groups directly, she encouraged working in coalitions with organizations that include former hate group members.

Michael Privot, Director of the European Network Against Racism, highlighted their work reaching out to corporations and SMEs to increase diversity in the workplace. He encouraged leaving 'silos', reaching outside of governments', civil society's, and corporations' respective comfort zones to work beyond traditional alliances. Emphasizing that islamophobia is a complex form of racism subverting some key values such as gender equality thereby preventing authorities from taking action to protect victims, such as women in employment and education.

The American Jewish Committee's Muslim-Jewish Relations Director, Robert Silverman, suggested successful coalitions to combat anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred ought to be bi-partisan – speaking to all sides of the political spectrum, not only traditional allies –, and multilevel – anchored in synagogues, mosques and local communities, but reaching beyond only the local level as national groups can better focus on policy guidance and working with national media.

Alfiaz Vaiya, Coordinator of the European Parliament Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup, highlighted the importance of also protecting the rights of other minorities –religious, women, migrants, or LGBTI. He urged against following dominant political trends, and pointed to the positive example of London Mayor Sadiq Khan for showing who European Muslims are: well integrated, living out their religion and European identity in peace.

Alia Hogben, Executive Director at the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, described how her organization spearheaded a campaign which saw legislation authorizing the use of religious arbitration to settle family disputes overturned, believing that it opposed women's equality in Canada. She credited much of this success to having formed a coalition with other organizations which worked

together to advance the issue at various levels. She further highlighted the importance of using terms related to Islam, such as Sharia, accurately in public debate.

The panel was moderated by **Shada Islam, Director for Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe.**

Lunch remarks

James Goldston, Executive Director of the Open Society Justice Initiative, told lunch attendees that States can make a positive difference through five priority areas. First, by expanding and enhancing the collection of data to track patterns of violence and discrimination. Second, by effectively enforcing legal protection against ethnic, racial or religious discrimination and violence. Third, by clarifying the nature of anti-Muslim hate crimes and helping victims. Fourth, by investing in long-term education, housing, employment and health efforts. And fifth, by offering and promoting a political discourse of inclusion, tolerance and respect for all.

Ignite talk

U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities Shaarik H. Zafar reminded the meeting that victims of terrorism worldwide are most frequently Muslims themselves. Mr Zafar suggested hatred and bigotry often correlated with low acquaintance with Muslims. He suggested it was key for Muslim communities – especially youth – to define their own place and stories in the societal debate.

Panel III: Positive narratives to promote pluralism and inclusion

This panel highlighted the vital role played by various forms of media in framing social understanding of Muslims and minority groups in general. There was a clear recognition of the challenge of access to media outlets for members of vulnerable groups and the importance of accurate and effective representation of such groups. Panelists stressed the urgency of addressing media misinformation and creating platforms for positive narratives of pluralism and diversity-based inclusion.

Engy Abdelkader, Senior Fellow and Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, suggested an important challenge before us was the limited frames and narratives available about Muslims as terrorists, migrants or victims. She called for actively promoting positive narratives.

Corinne Box, Director of Government Relations for the Bahá'í Community of Canada, underlined that to advance inclusion, law and policy had to be complemented by a broader public discourse on the role of religion in society. This would include intentionally fostering genuine, ongoing conversations wherein diverse religious and secular voices are welcomed.

***The Sultan and the Saint* Writer and Director Alex Kronemer** suggested using powerful stories to change people's perceptions about Muslims, instead of facts or data alone. He added the most efficient stories are not those of Muslims as Muslims, but of Muslims as people engaged in the human condition.

Zarqa Nawaz, Creator of TV show *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, described how the popular show helped to humanize Muslims to Canadians who were able to identify with its characters and the universal nature of its stories.

Finally, **Dean Obeidallah (Host, *The Dean Obeidallah Show*)** insisted on the importance of positive narratives to show the world who Muslims *are* (by opposition to who they are not – terrorists –, an explanation often made on news shows after attacks have taken place).

The panel was moderated by **Richard Arbeiter, Director General of the Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion at Global Affairs Canada.**

Closing remarks

After hearing a letter of support from **New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio** read out, the meeting heard **Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief** to close the day's discussions.

The Special Rapporteur welcomed the organization of the High-Level Forum, and reminded the meeting there was clear cause for concern about rising anti-Muslim discrimination and hatred in many parts of the world. He highlighted the global context was important to understand this phenomenon – globalization, rise of populisms, historical number of refugees –, and that it was essential to respond to a growing pushback against human rights by reasserting the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of rights. He underlined that attacks on any one group were attacks on all of humanity.