



**Statement by Ambassador Khalil Hashmi, Permanent Representative of Pakistan  
on behalf of the OIC Group  
on the first Commemoration of International Day to Combat Islamophobia  
17 March 2023**

**Ambassador Nassima Baghli,**

**Deputy High Commissioner for Humana Rights,**

**Excellencies,**

**Distinguished participants,**

On behalf of the OIC Group, I thank the OIC Observer Mission in Geneva for organizing this important event to commemorate the first International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

I also wish to thank DG UNOG and her team for their support.

Commemorating this Day resonates strongly with the ongoing efforts to combat multiple manifestations of discrimination, violence, and hostility against Muslims and their faith.

Its significance lies at multiple levels.

For the members of the OIC, it demonstrates an important milestone in highlighting the systemic and structural discrimination against millions of Muslims worldwide, due to their beliefs.

For the adherents of Islamic faith, it provides hope for action at both national and international levels.

For the international community, it demonstrates our joint resolve, common understanding, and shared effort to application of international human rights law to counter discrimination, hostility and violence based on religion or belief.

This has been a journey.

And let me walk you through it to recognize what has been achieved and what remains in the fight against hate and discrimination based on religion.



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 recognized that everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms without discrimination based on color, sex, language, and religion.

Later, these principles were codified in all core human rights covenants.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) reaffirms the right to freedom of expression and opinion but stipulates duties and responsibilities in exercising this right. Its article 20 states that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”.

While these articles are categorical in supporting the responsible exercise of freedom of expression, they are also clear about boundaries and limitations.

Parallel to these significant developments, the OIC countries also tried to negotiate a separate instrument to counter religious discrimination. In 1962, the UN General Assembly mandated the Geneva-based Commission on Human Rights to prepare a Declaration and legally binding instruments on (i) racial discrimination; and (ii) religious discrimination. A convention to eliminate racial discrimination was adopted within three years.

Article 5 of the International Convention to Eliminate all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) does call for prohibiting and eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Unfortunately, on the second track, discussions on the legally binding instrument of “religious discrimination” were long and challenging due to lack of political will on the part of certain member states. After long, arduous 18 years, a Declaration on eliminating religious discrimination was adopted in 1981 without any progress on the binding instrument.

The Durban Conference expressed deep concern over the increase in Islamophobia in various parts of the world. It also called for preparing complementary international standards to strengthen and update international instruments to eliminate racial discrimination.



The Geneva-based Ad hoc Committee on the Elaboration of Complementary Standards is mandated to prepare the optional protocol for ICERD by weaving in the elements of discrimination based, among other things, on religion.

The consensus-based Human Rights Council Resolution, known as 16/18, demonstrated progress in the fight against religious intolerance. An Action Plan agreed by consensus called for speaking out on incitement to violence, criminalizing it, and promoting interfaith dialogue and education.

The Rabat Plan of Action highlighted thresholds for determining incitement to violence.

### **Distinguished participants,**

But this progress on strengthening enforcement of international law on religion-based discrimination, hate, and incitement to violence has been a journey of few steps forward and many steps backward.

The current global landscape presents a sombre picture with a steady rise in discrimination, hostility, and violence based on religion.

Geo-political developments, populist hate-based politics, and a counter-terrorism overdrive to stigmatize people, their religion, race, and nationalities have abundantly exposed the gaping holes in the existing normative framework.

For decades now, Muslim women, youth, and children have borne the brunt of institutional discrimination, securitization of state policies, and stigmatization by sections of the media and academia.

This structural Islamophobia accompanies systemic discrimination, personal attacks, hateful rhetoric, and profiling of Muslims solely because of their beliefs and religious practices.

Influenced by right-wing ideologies, several countries have introduced legislation institutionalizing discrimination against Muslims, stereotyping, and restricting Muslim women and girls from wearing headscarves or facial veils. Refugees, migrants, and indigenous communities are also often the targets and victims of structural and systemic discrimination, undermining their dignity, rights, and freedoms.



It has become a norm in the name of politics and free speech to stereotype Muslims in many regions negatively, denigrate their revered personalities and desecrate their holy book - often in public, intentionally and with the sole purpose of inciting violence.

Recent incidents of desecration of the Holy Quran are not isolated but continuation of a series of unfortunate events over the years, either in the form of publication of caricatures, disrespecting revered religious personalities, or targeting Muslim communities through racially motivated campaigns or policies.

This International Day is not just about raising awareness but also a call to action for combating discrimination, bias and prejudice against billions of Muslims across the globe.

This occasion should also encourage us to view this scourge not through the prism of divisions on legal interpretations and long-held prejudices but through the lens of much-needed mutual understanding, dialogue and preventive actions.

### **Distinguished Participants,**

The OIC Group in Geneva will continue to avail all avenues to invite global attention towards the rising wave of religious discrimination, intolerance, hostility including Islamophobia by regularly interacting with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Procedures of the Council as well as civil society organizations.

Let us begin by doing what is needed:

Speak out against the despicable acts of incitement to hate and violence.

Enact legal deterrents to incitement to hate and violence by strengthening legal frameworks and bridging gaps.

Refrain from resorting to counterintuitive interpretations that are no more tenable.

**Thank you!!**