Side Event — Human Rights Council 60ᵗʰ Session

The Rabat Plan of Action in the Digital Age —
Balancing Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Religion
or Belief online

19 September 2025, 13–14h
Palais des Nations, Room VII, Building A

Background

The Human Rights Council has long grappled with the challenge of balancing freedom of expression with the right to freedom of religion or belief. Initiatives such as Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, the Istanbul Process, and the Rabat Plan of Action (RPA) on the prohibition of incitement to hatred have established key frameworks to guide this work. The RPA's six-factor "threshold test" — context, speaker, intent, content/form, extent of dissemination, and likelihood/imminence — has been widely endorsed through more than 60 UN resolutions.

In the digital era, however, new technologies and social media have transformed communication. Virality, anonymity, and algorithmic amplification have increased the scale and impact of hate speech and disinformation, while complicating the application of human rights standards. States and platforms vary significantly in their regulatory and policy approaches. At the same time, any restriction on online expression must comply with Article 19 of the ICCPR, requiring legality, legitimacy, necessity, and proportionality. Over-broad measures risk chilling legitimate speech, while under-inclusive rules fail to address real harms.

Objective

This side event will explore how the RPA's framework can be effectively applied to online environments in a way that strengthens both freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, and that addresses emerging risks, in particular religious hatred and disinformation, without undermining fundamental rights.

Discussion Themes

- Applicability of the RPA's key principles and its six-part "threshold test" to digital challenges such as virality, meme culture, algorithmic amplification.

- Risks of incitement to hatred, discrimination, hostility or violence against religious communities and legal and policy challenges in proving intent.

- Challenges in addressing hate speech online, while also preventing over-broad censorship or excessive surveillance.

- The role of Governments in applying the RPA to online spaces, examples of national and regional initiatives upholding freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression as mutually reinforcing.

- The role of various stakeholders in implementing a digital uplift to the RPA and importance of international human rights mechanisms for accountability of online violations.

Target Audience

- Member States and Permanent Missions.
- OHCHR and UN mandate holders.
- Tech companies, digital policy experts, and civil society actors.
- Academia and legal practitioners engaged in freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

Format

Interactive panel discussion in English followed by Q&A. A light lunch will be provided after the side event.

Agenda

13h00 – Welcome and Opening remarks by Switzerland

13h05 – Panel discussion

13h35 – Reflections from the floor

13h50 – Reactions by the panellists

13h55 – Closing remarks by Switzerland

Panellists

Sandra Lendenmann, Ambassador, Switzerland (Moderator)

Vasilika Hysi, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva

Peggy Hicks, Director Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures and Right to Development Division, OHCHR

Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Aymen Zaghdoudi, Senior Policy Counsel, Access Now

Co-sponsors

Permanent Missions of Albania, Canada, Iceland, Morocco, North Macedonia and Portugal