

COMBATTING DISINFORMATION AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Disinformation and rising Islamophobia have emerged as serious challenges in the contemporary world. Muslim populations across the globe are affected by this phenomenon and this has also led to numerous untoward incidences in countries where Muslim populations reside as immigrants. Disinformation has been instrumental in creating perceptions about Muslims and have thus resulted in hate crimes and other xenophobic trends. In a largely integrated world, such trends are not only dangerous but also detrimental for peaceful coexistence.

With the emergence of far right governments in the west and rising intolerance, a lethal form of discrimination against Islam and Muslims is seen around the globe. Populist parties in the west and in countries like India derive power through their ideology of hate and win popular support, and in the process create a schism in the society. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) undoubtedly has a larger role to play in combatting rising Islamophobia and this remains one of the greatest challenges of contemporary times. Such fissures in societies call for a proactive approach by organizations like the OIC, which must come up with newer approaches towards tackling this rising menace. An important step in this direction should be the initiation of interfaith dialogue, for better understanding of each other's faiths. Such endeavours can be successful, if carried out at all levels starting from the media, academics, religious and political leaders. Electronic, print and most particularly, social media have a great role to play in this regard. Therefore, the OIC must step up efforts to tackle this rising trend and its partial success in this regard is evident from the fact that the world has begun to acknowledge the existence of this issue.

The OIC held its 12th Conference of the Information Ministers of the OIC in Istanbul, Turkiye from October 22-23, 2022. The theme of the conference was “Combating Disinformation and Islamophobia in the Post-Truth Era.”¹ Representatives from 57 countries, including Pakistan, took part to deepen their cooperation with new strategies in the fields of media and communications in the Islamic world and to tackle the spread of all kinds of disinformation.

With regards to Islamophobia and disinformation being one of the most serious challenges faced by the Muslim world, the conference shed light on the challenges being faced by the Muslim world, particularly Islamophobia, which is a harsh reality and gathers most of its support from misinformation which helps in igniting the flames of hatred and intolerance. Hence, it was stressed that media institutions and outlets, whether those allied with the OIC or those of member states, should deal with these issues through an informed and persuasive discourse; and disseminate news highlighting positive developments, tourism, economic and cultural projects reflecting hope and optimism, rather than those that reflect negativity. A declaration to fight disinformation and Islamophobia was adopted, urging the media to promote informed discourse. It was agreed that disinformation and Islamophobia are among the most serious practices to misrepresent facts and mislead local and international public opinion, as they seek to distort truth. Participants called for persistently combating such propaganda through the media as well as through effective approaches and mechanisms in an objective way. Such challenges call for greater cooperation between the members of the OIC and to ensure meaningful action, such engagements are necessary.

In an era of fast media content dissemination, it becomes imperative for countries to take action in the face of disinformation. Secretary-General, OIC, Hissein Brahim Taha also stressed on the fact that the challenges being faced by the member states in this regard must not be ignored and that there is a need for reviewing the media’s discourse with respect to religious matters in particular. The Secretary General also highlighted that in an age of easy access to information, the youth was vulnerable and prone to fall for “pseudo-Islamic slogans that have nothing to do with the Islamic religion.”

Pakistani Information Minister, Maryam Aurangzeb, while speaking at the conference, said that in order to protect the rights of Muslim minorities in different parts of the world there was a need to work towards constitutional liberties and join hands in defeating the rise of Islamophobia. She also highlighted that the rapid rise in pre-planned communal riots, mob lynching’s and other hate crimes particularly towards Indian Muslims have been on the rise. A notable suggestion by the Pakistani

¹ OIC adopts Istanbul declaration to fight against Islamophobia, October 23, 2022
<https://sonna.so/en/2022/10/23/oic-adopts-istanbul-declaration-to-fight-against-disinformation-islamophobia/>

Minister was that the Department of Information of the OIC General Secretariat could designate journalists from the OIC member states and organize field trips to Jammu and Kashmir and Palestine with a view to facilitating investigative journalism and factual reporting. She also said that there is a need to establish a 'Working Group on Disinformation and Islamophobia' in the age of social media. It may be noted that due to the relentless efforts of the Muslim world, the United Nations proclaimed 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. This was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly in March, 2022. Pakistan has played a key role in this regard and presented a resolution in the UN General Assembly that called for designating a special day for this purpose. The OIC declaration once again highlights the seriousness of the issue and the challenges Muslim nations face due to Islamophobia. It also highlights the priority the OIC gives to an issue that has created a huge dilemma for populations across the Muslim world. It represents the collective sentiment of the Muslim world.

The OIC through its offices must use its collective wisdom, power and clout to defeat negative propaganda and also capitalize on the UN General Assembly Resolution which has declared a special day for this purpose. Since, the declaration is itself a success, therefore, it can be used for raising awareness about the sensitivity of this issue and how it affects the Muslim minorities across the globe. Persuasive discourse is the only answer to combating disinformation in a largely polarized world.