

Statement by Human Rights First

Plenary session 4: Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims

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Human Rights First is deeply concerned by acts of violence and intolerance against Muslims in Europe and North America. In recent years there have been far too many reports of hate crimes against Muslims in the form of personal assaults in the streets and attacks on places of worship and on immigrant-run businesses.

The effects of such acts of hate violence are exacerbated by the fact that they are taking place against a background of a climate of hostility toward Muslims. Obstacles to freedom of religion, widespread discrimination, and anti-Muslim rhetoric in mainstream media and political discourse are an important part of the context in which violent acts are being perpetrated.

Intolerant public discourse that goes unchallenged erodes the confidence of victims of hate crime to report their victimization to the authorities and seek justice from the police and the courts.

Though anti-Muslim hate speech is widespread across the OSCE region, some of the incidents that have garnered attention in recent years have originated in the United States.

In 2010, worldwide attention was drawn to the decision of a fringe, Florida-based pastor to publicly burn a copy of the Koran and the violent reactions around the world. More recently, *The Innocence of Muslims* video sparked similar violent reactions around the globe. The U.S. government rightly determined that both these forms of expression, as offensive as they are to many, did not run counter to the U.S. First Amendment; the government thus did not pursue criminal charges. But the societal and political response did not end there. Whereas U.S. law allows a wide latitude for engaging in offensive speech, there is also a long tradition of counterspeech. In these incidents, President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and a long list of political, religious, and civic leaders from across the political spectrum condemned the anti-Muslim intolerance at the heart of these initiatives. Thousands of religious and civil society leaders also mobilized across the nation in various ways to show solidarity with Muslims.

Human Rights First was engaged in a number of these efforts to mobilize voices to stand up to hatred.

One initiative involved the development and wide public release – together with the US-based Muslim Public Affairs Council – of a set of principles to condemn hate speech, fight violence and protect free expression. Among the principles: 1) hate speech against Muslims must be taken seriously, 2) hate speech must be fought through non legal means, with responsible speech, 3) violence as a response to speech is unacceptable.

In another initiative, in an effort to counter the misconceptions and distrust of the Muslim community, Human Rights First partnered with interfaith groups in the U.S. to engage faith leaders in events to highlight respect among people of different faiths. More than 70 ceremonies were held across the United State.—starting at Washington National Cathedral – in which faith leaders from the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities read from one another’s sacred texts.

In conclusion, while we continue to press governments to implement their commitments to protect religious freedom and respond to violence motivated by religious intolerance, we see the added value of partnerships between human rights, Muslim, and interfaith organizations in effectively challenging anti-Muslim hatred in a human rights framework.