



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Plenary Session 4: Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims**

As prepared for delivery by the United States Delegation  
to the OSCE Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Conference,  
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Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims remains an ongoing challenge across the OSCE region. Anti-Muslim sentiment and restrictions on religious expression continue in many OSCE participating States. Outright bans on religious clothing and across-the-board policies denying access to public spaces remain in place for those wearing religious attire. These concerns are part of a larger trend of growing anti-Muslim sentiment, which have in some countries become a central component of rightwing populist and extremist ideas that inhibit religious freedom. Some participating States have cited rationales such as notions of national security, preservation of national identity, and views on gender equality to justify their failures to adhere to their OSCE commitments. The participating States have the responsibility to protect and respect the fundamental freedom of Muslims – like all others – to peacefully practice their faith and live free from harassment and discrimination.

Several participating States in the Central Asian region have undertaken policies to promote a particular government-sponsored brand of Islam at the expense of all other views and practices. These governments frequently control the selection of imams and Muslim leaders, review and censor sermons before they are delivered, and dictate the content of religious education.

In Tajikistan, a so-called “Law on Parental Responsibility” bans children from participation in public religious activities and organizations, while other regulations effectively bar the vast majority of women from praying in mosques. In October 2012, a caller to Islamic prayer became the first person to face charges under the law for allowing people under the age of 18 to attend prayers.

In Kazakhstan, a 2011 religion law introduced stringent mandatory registration requirements for missionaries and religious organizations; under this law, authorities have denied registration to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community on the basis of their religious beliefs.

Non-governmental sources, including the IGIHRDU and human rights NGO Ezgulik, have estimated that there are between 10,000-12,000 individuals imprisoned on charges related to “religious extremism” or membership in an illegal religious group, but there are no government statistics available to confirm or refute this figure. Some of those arrested on

such charges, including devout Muslims with no ties to violent extremism, were reportedly subject to torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions.

When governments restrict religious freedom in an effort to prevent “extremism,” they risk driving religion underground and out of public view and ultimately exacerbating the problem of violent extremism.

We remain concerned by the use of Russia’s “extremism” law to justify raids on religious organizations, ban religious literature and restrict the freedom to worship of members of several Muslim groups. In March, a court in Orenburg banned more than 65 Islamic works, the largest such ban of religious literature in a single court case. We welcomed the Council of Europe Venice Commission’s expression of serious concern about the anti-extremism law last June, noting that the vague definition of “extremism” lent itself to broad interpretation and arbitrary application by authorities.

Some Governments in Western Europe, including France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain, have banned or attempted to ban head coverings and other religious attire in public places. On the other hand, in Chechnya in Russia the law requires women to wear a hijab in public buildings.

Bureaucratic obstacles and public intolerance create roadblocks for Muslim communities to open and maintain places of worship. In Greece, the construction of a government-funded mosque in Athens appears to be slowly moving forward, but only after many years of discussion and delays. In Switzerland, a ban on construction of minarets remains in effect, hindering the Muslim community’s ability to construct new mosques. In Russia, the Muslim community in Sochi has been trying unsuccessfully for 15 years to open a mosque in a city that will soon host the 2014 Olympics.

Prejudice and discrimination against Muslims continue, stirred by anti-Muslim and xenophobic political groups. Disparities in education, employment, housing, and other sectors persist between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Europe. The majority of OSCE States have failed to provide anti-Muslim crime data for the OSCE Annual Hate Crimes Report, making it difficult to gain an accurate picture of the problem.

We commend OSCE’s efforts to address anti-Muslim stereotypes. ODIHR’s *Guidelines for educators on countering intolerance and discrimination against Muslims: addressing Islamophobia through education* are a valuable resource.

The U.S. Government actively combats all forms of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims and is making efforts to build mutual respect between people of all faiths. We also have worked with religious communities across the country to ensure that they feel safe. Through our 9-11 backlash initiative, we have investigated cases in which defendants targeted those they perceived to be Muslim, Sikh, or of Arab or South East Asian descent.

Attorney General Holder has made engaging American Arab, Muslim, Sikh, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities a Justice Department priority. Too many members of these communities are targeted by people who use the fear spread by terrorists as an excuse to

engage in their own acts of violence. Over the past four years, the Justice Department has investigated and prosecuted 14 defendants in such cases, which have included multiple cases of arson against places of worship, a mosque bombing, and various assaults and threats against members of these communities.

We have issued legal challenges to efforts to prevent building mosques and other houses of worship.

Around the world, the U.S. government works continuously to ensure that persons of all faiths, including Muslims, can freely enjoy the fundamental freedom of religion. Our Special Representative to Muslim Communities and our Special Envoy to the Organization for Islamic Cooperation both actively engage Muslim individuals and organizations worldwide to hear their concerns. Our Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the office she oversees – as well as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom – actively promote the religious rights of Muslims and promote religious tolerance for people of all faiths through diplomatic engagement and their respective annual reports that shine a spotlight on abuses. In 2011, our Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism together with the Department’s Special Representative to Muslim Communities launched an inter-denominational youth program “Hours Against Hate,” a campaign to stop bigotry and promote pluralism and respect across lines of culture, religion, tradition, class, disability, and gender. Using social media, the initiative asks young people to pledge an hour or more of their time to help someone who does not look, live, or pray like them.

The United States remains deeply committed to working at home and abroad to combat anti-Muslim intolerance, discrimination and violence.