



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Towards Muslims

As prepared for delivery by Dr. Maha Hadi Hussain
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Thank you, Mr. Moderator.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very honored to participate in this workshop on Promotion of Tolerance and Non-discrimination towards Muslims as a member of the U.S. delegation.

I am a naturalized American citizen who chose the United States for a homeland. I am an Arab Muslim who was born and grew up in Iraq where basic human freedoms were lacking, thus I speak from a personal experience. As an immigrant, I looked for a country that would accept me as I am, that allowed me and my family to express our opinions, to practice our faith, to keep our identity and yet be treated as no less than a citizen, to be integrated but not assimilated.

Islam and Arabs are, perhaps, the most misunderstood religion and group. With the recent unforgivable events of 9/11, the 3/11 Madrid train bombing and the recent horrible attack in Beslan, Russia, Muslims as people, and especially Arab Muslims, find themselves stereotyped as terrorists. They are suspects just because of who they are or how they look.

Islam teaches tolerance, love, equality and appreciation for human life. The violent manifestations in the name of Islam by a very small group of terrorists must not ever be assumed to be a characteristic of the over billion Muslims worldwide. At the heart of the negative perception is a lack of understanding and knowledge about Islam and its believers.

Most Muslims and Arabs face oppression and lack of fundamental rights and economic prosperity in their motherlands, while those who immigrated in search of a better life and future for their families face a predicament of discrimination, marginalization and second-class citizenship. While the threat of terrorism is real and it can never be condoned, the negative attention stigmatizes communities and fosters xenophobia against minorities -- be they Muslims, Arabs or others. It also can result in violation of individual privacy and abuse of police powers. It is hard to justify these actions, particularly in democratic states where human and minority rights are meant to be protected.

Reactions of governments worldwide and particularly in predominantly non-Muslim countries to the events of 9/11 led to direct discrimination against ordinary law abiding Muslims and Arabs.

It was difficult to be Muslim in the United States following the 9/11 attacks. Many Arabs and Muslims faced hostility, threats and violence from other Americans. According to a Report of the Office of the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Justice, decisions regarding 9/11 detainees and their classification as persons "of interest" to an FBI

investigation often were “indiscriminate and haphazard.” (DOJ OIG Reported dated June 2003 at page 4, found at [www....](#)) While my family and I have not had a negative experience and were not victims of profiling, negative experiences were not uncommon for Arabs or Muslims. However, efforts are ongoing to ensure the lawful protection of our rights. President Bush repeatedly and publicly stated that Islam is a religion of peace and it is the acts of a few who pervert its teachings to condone the use of violence. The Department of Justice Office of Inspector General Report cited above examined excesses in the post 9/11 reaction by domestic law enforcement agencies. The Department of Justice created procedures for individuals to report possible violations and for rapid investigation of those complaints. The Department of Justice has also reached out to affected communities to provide them with information on their rights and on how to file complaints. After much debate, the Department of Homeland Security ended the formal requirement that visitors to the United States from certain countries register with immigration authorities. Furthermore, if passed, the proposed Civil Liberties Restoration Act, introduced in Congress in June, would ensure respect for basic rights and fair treatment in the United States, particularly for people detained under U.S. immigration laws.

There are also examples of US officials at all levels working to protect the civil liberties of American Muslims. In my state of Michigan, residents of Hamtramck, once-predominantly Polish city, upheld an amendment to the city’s noise ordinance to allow the Muslim call to prayer to play over loudspeakers. Another example of efforts to ensure respect for rights is the U.S. Department of Justice intervention this year in an Oklahoma court case where it argued successfully that a student had the right to wear the hijab at school. While things are not yet perfect in the US, a great deal of effort is underway to balance the need for security and individual rights protection.

With the belief that they are protecting their citizens, governments in several countries have implemented changes that are of great concern, as they appear to be crafted out of a fear of Islam. This fear seems to have led France to ban religious attire in French public schools specifically to prevent Muslim girls from wearing the hijab, as has been the case in Turkey. Not only should young Muslim women not have to choose between their faith and a public education, but this law will also lead to marginalization of the already disfranchised French Muslims, re-enforcing the sense of inequality and widening the gap between them and the rest of the population in education and economic power.

Similarly, several German states, such as Baden-Wuerttemberg and Lower Saxony, have enacted discriminatory legislation banning teachers from wearing the hijab -- but not symbols from other religions. These laws make it difficult for Muslim women to observe religious practices of their faith in public places.

The actions of the Belgian Government to control the Belgian Muslim Council by forcing a re-election of its members before the statutorily designated time are also of concern, as it is improper to meddle in the internal affairs of law-abiding religious communities. The use of profiling and tracking systems by German authorities for what is characterized as “radical Muslims” is a concern, as this term is vague and subjective. In Uzbekistan, reports suggest that over 5,000 individuals, predominately Muslim, remain jailed on account of their religious beliefs or affiliations. Reports also suggest that devout Muslims are being arrested on falsified evidence as alleged terrorists.

In several countries, restrictions are being imposed on speech. The United Kingdom plans to begin requiring immigrant imams to speak English and preach in English. Spain is considering similar requirements that would oblige sermons in mosques to be delivered in Spanish, while scripture reading can remain in Arabic. The ability to express one's religious beliefs in the language of one's choice is fundamental to an individual's religious expression.

It is imperative that we not allow ignorance and prejudice to prevail. It is possible to build trust and bridge the gap. This requires that governments lead the way by taking steps to value diversity and integration, both in school and at work. They should work to foster climates where religious groups are encouraged to operate openly through liberal registration policies, and so do not feel the need to operate underground.

Political leaders should vocally speak out about the importance of diversity and respect for traditions and cultures, while also looking to appoint qualified minorities to government positions.

Community leaders should reach out to educate about their faith and background and to encourage a healthy dialogue in society.

Laws must not be abused, and while we all agree that criminal acts should be punished, people should not be punished for their religious beliefs or their affiliation with a particular religion. Devoutly held beliefs are not a criminal offense.

In a democracy, diversity should thrive, not shrivel, and individual rights should be protected and not selectively violated. Minorities should not be assimilated but rather integrated into society through ongoing mutual dialogue, tolerance and understanding. Diversity should be viewed as strength and not a weakness. The burden falls on governments and community leaders to lead the way.