



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 10 Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador at Large Suzan Johnson Cook
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At the annual White House Iftar dinner, President Obama observed that freedom of religion “is not just an American right; it is a universal human right. And we will defend the freedom of religion, here at home and around the world.” His words echo not only values held dearly in the United States, but also the commitments we have all undertaken in Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act.

The United States mourns the loss of four brave individuals who laid their lives down working with the people of Libya to build a better future. As protests around the world over the past several weeks have shown, insults to people of faith can have a significant impact. But violence has no place in society; it is no way to honor any religion and no way to respond to an insult. We all – whether we are leaders in government, leaders in civil society or religious leaders – must stand up and draw the line against violence.

At the same time, now more than ever, the international community must reassert its commitment to protecting free expression – no matter how insulting one’s words might be. Let me state very clearly that the United States Government abhors hate speech and those who intentionally insult the beliefs of others. But we believe that it is our responsibility to find a way to combat hate speech while also respecting the fundamental right to free expression enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As President Obama said last week at the UN General Assembly, “Americans have fought and died around the globe to protect the right of all people to express their views, even views that we profoundly disagree with...We do so because given the power of faith in our lives, and the passion that religious differences can inflame, the strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression; it is more speech—the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy, and lift up the values of understanding and mutual respect.”

Research shows that government suppression of religious freedom often results in increased violence. Nonetheless, restrictions on religious freedom in Central Asia are often justified in the name of maintaining stability and combating terrorism. Nonviolent religious minorities are often targets, as well as members of the Muslim majority who deviate from state-sanctioned beliefs and practices.

In the Vienna Concluding Document, the OSCE’s participating States recognized the right of religious communities to “establish and maintain freely and accessibly places of worship or assembly.” To this end, we urge participating States to ensure that houses of worship can be built without arbitrary or discriminatory barriers at the local and regional level. Certainly, houses of worship must also be protected from acts of violence.

I would now like to introduce a colleague from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF, Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett. Dr. Swett is the Chair of USCIRF, an independent, bipartisan, federal body dedicated to monitoring religious freedom conditions abroad and to recommending policies that will enhance freedom where it is imperiled. USCIRF is a valuable resource for the Department of State in considering the United States' positions on religious freedom issues. Chairperson Swett will continue our presentation, reflecting on religious freedom and challenges to it in the OSCE space.

Chairperson Swett.

Thank you very much Madame Ambassador and Mr. Moderator. I appreciate the opportunity to speak about a challenge that is present throughout the OSCE, including in my own country. While we cannot prevent every act of religious intolerance governments have a responsibility to address them when they occur. In the United States, the Justice Department aided a Muslim community in the Tennessee city of Murfreesboro in its two-year effort to build a new mosque, overcoming acts of prejudice, vandalism, and arson. In the end, the Tennessee mosque opened in August 2012, in time for Ramadan.

In the matter of giving approval for houses of worship, things are not always what they seem to be. Barriers to the construction of houses of worship are sometimes clothed in debates over zoning, architecture, or historic preservation. Unfortunately, there are instances when these considerations, which may appear neutral, become vehicles for prejudice in their actual implementation. Worse still, buildings used for religious purposes are sometimes the targets of violence ranging from vandalism to demolition. We deplore the atmosphere which has led to numerous mosque, churches, synagogues and other prayer spaces in France and other western European countries, including the United States, having been vandalized in the last several months. In the past year, authorities in Tajikistan have closed mosques and prayer houses of religious groups it considered "nontraditional." In September, a Pentecostal church in Moscow was looted and destroyed in the middle of the night, reportedly by court order, while local authorities stood watch.

We urge governments to take the necessary measures to protect all religious buildings, as well as to expand access to places of worship for all religious communities. We are also concerned by attacks that target people or their houses of worship because of their faith or beliefs, such as the recent attempted arson on an Alevi house of worship in Turkey. We encourage the Government of Turkey to pass the reforms necessary to permit the re-opening of the Halki Seminary and to send a clear message of tolerance and inter-communal cooperation.

Moderator, our delegation is also concerned by the recent efforts in several countries to ban circumcision, which we consider an issue of fundamental religious freedom. We applaud the German Bundestag for voting overwhelmingly in support of the right of circumcision on religious grounds, and we support the efforts of the German government to ensure that this religious practice is preserved.

We will address anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and other forms of intolerance more thoroughly in our intervention on Wednesday in session 14. Thank you.