



**HDIM Working Session – Number 11**  
**Monday, October 1, 2012**  
**Directed to: OSCE states / NGOs**

**Title: Religious freedoms must be protected**

It's important to thank those of you who speak respectfully of all faiths, regardless of your own personal beliefs. This is the example of civilized dialogue that must set the course and it is an example for tolerant, cohesive, and dignified communities.

Making negative claims about other people's faiths beliefs, based on the actions of a few, has no place in such a dialogue, and I urge those who choose to speak disparagingly of Islam to reframe their arguments so that it promotes dialogue and understanding rather than intolerance and fear.

Sadly, it is intolerance and fear that often cloud the legitimate rights and claims made by Muslim minorities, walking as they are in the same footsteps of previous minority communities here in Europe and around the world who at one point were also unfairly labeled as "the Other".

Our recommendation to OSCE states is to recognize that secularism, when defined in such a manner which limits the religious freedoms of citizens (where there is no demonstrable connection to a legitimate need for identification or security or unless it can be shown that the expression of that belief causes direct harm to others), should not supersede other belief systems in preventing an individual from openly practicing his or her faith.

Otherwise the objective of neutrality of the state may become equated with efforts to erase faith from the public sphere rather than ensuring the state is not seen as endorsing one faith over another.

We are living in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-faith society where all beliefs should be accepted so long as they do not condone any illegal action which the state has deemed to be against the law. Muslim citizens, like all citizens, are taking part in their democratic societies to help contribute to laws and policies that seek to protect and ameliorate human and civil rights.

That means that the expression of religious belief, including wearing the veil, the cross, the yarmulke, or a beard, etc., should not be shut out of the public space because that would simply impose one belief system over another. This both implicitly and explicitly relegates citizens to second-class status and prevents them from fully contributing to their societies simply because they wish to practice their faith openly.

We respectfully submit that this is discriminatory and does a disservice to the high standards the OSCE has set for itself. We look forward to Europe's continuing progress towards a more uniform policy on freedom of religion, practice and participation in society. Already, we are

heartened by the new Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, which is relevant here as well as to other communities.

I am cognizant of the historical experience of discrimination that has occurred against other minorities in Canada including Aboriginal, Japanese, Chinese communities among others. However, I am optimistic that our various levels of governments are intent on promoting a universal understanding of multiculturalism that is committed to balancing rights fairly. I point to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's new policy on competing rights as an example of how this might be achieved: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-competing-human-rights>

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