

**Intervention of  
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OSCE HDIM Panel: Tolerance and Non-discrimination**

As the Founder and President of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, I am honored to address the OSCE concerning the state of religion in the region since the last HDIM. The Institute has submitted reports on troubling religious freedom situations in over 20 OSCE member states. These reports are available on the table outside.

As OSCE member states are vividly aware, freedom of religion cannot simply be considered a church-state issue. Rather, as history has shown us, religious freedom has direct bearing on every aspect of society. Freedom of religion or belief is arguably the most fundamental human right in that it recognizes each individual's quest for meaning; it recognizes that each human being deserves an inviolable space in which to explore and express their spiritual identity and ultimate purpose; and it recognizes the rights of institutions to work for and toward the spiritual and religious developments of their adherents and of society at large.

When governments or other groups attempt to control this most basic region of human self-determination, they infringe on the very dignity of the human person. Allow me to share some of the more dangerous ways in which the governments of OSCE member states have done so just since the last HDIM:

The ongoing practice by some member states of arbitrary registration criteria is a direct violation of the OSCE's religious freedom standards and of that self-determination.

Currently 18 member states have registration standards which are inconsistent with OSCE commitments to religious freedom.

The act by member states – such as France and Belgium – of establishing and funding “sect observatories” as governmental agencies, with the mission to eliminate “dangerous sects and cults,” makes a mockery of any commitment to religious freedom called for by the OSCE. This is compounded by the corresponding “sects lists” in such member states. Approximately 600 groups are identified on Belgium’s list of “sects.” The list includes, but is not limited to, Jehovah's Witnesses, Zen Buddhists, Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, Amish, Quakers, five Catholic groups, the YWCA and Hasidic Jews.

Several OSCE member states have over the past year introduced restrictive religion laws. In particular, the Institute

is deeply troubled by the current state of religious freedom in Kazakhstan, scheduled to chair this august institution in 2010.

In July 2008, Prime Minister Karim Masimov and the Kazakh parliament initially approved a draft law which would severely undermine the religious freedom that Kazakhstan has cultivated since its independence in 1991. As of this week, the Majilis or lower parliamentary house has officially passed the bill. The law includes measures that would:

- lengthen and complicate the registration process for religious communities;

- invalidate the registration of religious bodies with fewer than 50 members;
- prohibit smaller, less historical religious groups from renting and owning property;
- prevent religious groups that have existed in Kazakhstan for less than 10 years from engaging in religious education.

The Kazakh government's increasingly antagonistic attitude toward religious freedom can be witnessed in recent publications by the Ministry of Justice. In a pamphlet entitled "How Not to Fall Under the Influence of Religious Sects," the

ministry states that conversion to another faith constitutes treason towards one's background and the nation.

Such laws and publications clearly violate Kazakhstan's OSCE pledge to "respect the rights of...religious communities to establish and maintain freely accessible places of worship or assembly, organize themselves according to their own...institutional structure...and to solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions."

As a result, we strongly urge the OSCE member states to reconsider Kazakhstan's chairmanship in 2010 unless the Kazakh government revises the draft law to be in compliance with OSCE guidelines concerning religious freedom. Without

these changes, a Kazakh chairmanship compromises the integrity and authority of the OSCE and its dedication to religious freedom and corresponding human rights.