



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Importance of Dialogue and Public Engagement in Promoting Tolerance and Integration

As prepared for delivery by Shaarik H. Zafar,
Senior Policy Advisor, Office for Civil Rights & Civil Liberties,
U.S. Department of Homeland Security,
at the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting
on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding,
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I am honored to represent the United States at this landmark OSCE meeting on promoting tolerance and inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic understanding. Many of the problems the world faces today are directly attributable to the lack of such understanding. As such, I applaud the Belgian Chair for its initiative in planning this meeting and the Government of Kazakhstan for hosting it. I look forward to working with delegations from all of the participating States over the next two days as we discuss ways to promote tolerance between cultural, religious, and ethnic communities.

I would like to focus my remarks on the lessons the U.S. government has learned on the importance of dialogue and public engagement in promoting tolerance and integration, and preventing and reconciling conflicts. Initially, consistent communication and dialogue with the American public is an essential part of the Federal government's work. Our open system of governance requires that we respond to inquiries; educate and share information on our programs and policies; and provide a platform for the community to air grievances, thoughts, and opinions. We do this in a variety of ways: we develop educational materials; we respond to correspondence; and we also reach out to community groups directly and make senior government representatives available to answer questions and provide information and guidance.

Our experience has shown that community dialogue is particularly important in the context of law enforcement and homeland security. Indeed, public interaction and relationship building are widely-acknowledged as essential tools in the post-September 11 environment. In a recent study, the Police Executive Research Forum concluded that, "When law enforcement demonstrates an awareness of cultural and religious sensitivities and traditions, they [sic] can engender a bond of trust with those communities."¹ Not surprisingly, agencies such as the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security have robust public outreach initiatives.

¹ "Protecting Your Community from Terrorism: Strategies for Local Law Enforcement," Vol. 2 "Working with Diverse Communities," available at <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/mime/open.pdf?Item=1364>

I work for the Office for Civil Rights & Civil Liberties at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.² The mission of the Department is to prevent and deter terrorist attacks and respond to threats and hazards to the nation, while ensuring safe and secure borders; welcoming lawful immigrants and visitors; and promoting the free-flow of commerce. The role of our Office is to ensure that the Department carries out its mission while maintaining our fundamental rights and liberties.³ We also work to promote diversity and integration, and prevent and reconcile conflicts between the Department and the American public. Specifically, we

- assist the Secretary for Homeland Security review policies and procedures that impact civil rights;
- review and assess information alleging abuses by Departmental personnel;
- provide leadership to our Department’s Equal Employment Opportunity program; and,
- serve as an information and communication channel with the public.

I would like to draw special attention to this last point. We believe it is a wise investment to spend significant amounts of our time communicating with the public, providing information, and hearing and responding to concerns. We are convinced that our first function – helping to shape policy in ways that are mindful of the U.S. Constitution and Federal civil rights laws – is much more effective when we listen to the reactions and concerns of the American people. Good policy and good communications with the public are inherently connected with one another.

In this regard, we have sustained dialogues with numerous American communities. For example, we meet with leaders of the disability community to discuss emergency preparedness issues, particularly in the context of natural disasters. We also meet with immigration advocacy groups, who are concerned with border security and naturalization policies. And we regularly meet with the Arab, Muslim, Sikh, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Americans to discuss ways to protect the homeland while maintaining civil rights in a post September 11 context. As this is my area of focus, I would like to share with you lessons we have learned by engaging with these communities.

9/11 of course represents the height of intolerance. Sadly, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, we witnessed an increase in acts of bigotry, born of hatred and ignorance, and directed against those who were, or perceived to be, Muslim, Arab, or Middle Eastern. I say “perceived to be” because often times the victim did not fall under any of these categories. I have seen cases where the victim was Eastern European or Portuguese, but was mistaken for being Arab. In fact, the first casualty of a Post 9/11 backlash crime was Balbir Singh Sodi, a member of the Sikh faith. The lesson we learned is that ignorance combined with bigotry is a very dangerous combination indeed. But it is a combination that all Member States must combat. The question then, is how?

Recommendation 1: Public officials should publicly condemn discrimination and take proactive steps to regularly meet with vulnerable communities.

² www.dhs.gov/civil liberties

³ What we in the U.S. refer to as “civil rights and liberties” may be defined broadly as “human rights.”

We have found that one very easy, yet beneficial, step is for senior government leaders to make public statements condemning intolerance and bigotry. Speaking at the Islamic Center of Washington D.C. on September 17, 2001, President George W. Bush made it clear that backlash crimes would not be tolerated, stating that “Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don't represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of that kind of behavior.”⁴

Such statements are essential in times of crisis, to diffuse tensions and prevent or de-escalate conflicts. We recall that Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke eloquently on this subject in the wake of the London bombings.⁵ But leadership statements should not be limited to times of crisis. Indeed, we recommend that Member States encourage their public officials to set the national mood and regularly speak out on the importance of pluralism, diversity, and respect.

Senior officials should also make it a point to lend support and meet publicly with members of vulnerable communities. Last October, our Department was privileged to co-sponsor a unique “iftaar” – an event breaking the fast during Ramadan – along with the EU and British Ambassadors to the United States. The event was remarkable because it brought together U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, then British Home Secretary Charles Clarke, U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, and European Commission Vice President Franco Frattini, along with many of the top leaders of the American Muslim community. In this informal and comfortable setting, all of these senior leaders gave moving comments about the value of tolerance and respect.

Unquestionably, such actions from senior government officials have helped develop growing partnerships with key Arab, Muslim, and South Asian American leaders. But they have also sent a message to the broader American public that these communities are a valuable and integral part of the American fabric, and deserve respect.

Recommendation 2: Member States should aggressively enforce anti-discrimination laws and encourage communities to report abuses.

While important, words and meetings must generate action. We fully agree with a central premise of this session that dialogue itself is not enough and that “[i]t is of fundamental importance to take concrete steps and carefully developed measures designed to create and preserve a harmonious and inclusive society.”⁶ An example of this is our commitment to enforcing civil rights laws and encouraging communities to report allegations of illegal discrimination. I previously served as the Special Counsel for Post 9/11 National Origin Discrimination at the U.S. Department of Justice.⁷ There, my role was to

- coordinate the investigation of hate crimes, employment discrimination, and other unlawful forms of national origin and religious discrimination;

⁴ Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>

⁵ Statement to Parliament on London Bombings, July 11, 2005, available at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page7903.asp>

⁶ The Annotated Agenda of the Tolerance Implementation Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding p. 4, available at http://www.osce.org/documents/cio/2006/05/19272_en.pdf

⁷ <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/nordwg.html>

- conduct outreach to vulnerable communities to provide them information about Federal civil rights protections; and
- Encourage these communities to report abuses to the appropriate authorities.

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice has investigated over 700 incidents involving violence or threats of violence against individuals perceived to be Muslim, or of Arab, Middle Eastern, or South Asian descent. Working with its partners in state and local governments, the Justice Department has brought charges in many of these cases, and has also filed lawsuits to protect the rights of vulnerable communities in the context of employment, housing, and religious discrimination.

At the Department of Homeland Security, the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties has used its statutory authority to

- investigate complaints involving illegal racial, ethnic, and religious profiling committed by Department personnel;
- improve the operation of aviation watch lists; and
- work with border security officials to strengthen asylum policies

Notably, these enforcement actions, beyond being legally and morally sound, reinforce civic participation and promote tolerance and integration. This is particularly true for recent immigrants, whose prior experience with law enforcement in their native countries may have largely been negative. By encouraging communities to report violations, and then taking action and bringing investigations and prosecutions, we send three powerful messages: (1) Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, Sikh, and South Asian Americans are just that—Americans, and are entitled to the same rights and liberties as everyone else; (2) hate crimes and illegal discrimination have no place in a civilized society, and will not be tolerated; and (3) in the United States, there is a legal process that addresses discriminatory acts. All Americans have the right to participate in the legal process, and we should all expect justice from the legal system.

Recommendation 3: Member States should develop training programs on ethnic and religious minorities to foster cultural competency among government officials.

My first two points, regarding public statements and civil rights enforcement, dealt with communicating with the American public generally, and specifically, with the American Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, Sikh, and South Asian communities. It is just as important to remind those of us in government about the importance of tolerance and respect.

Our experience has shown that beyond the public relations benefits, our dialogue and outreach efforts help government officials do their jobs better. In the law enforcement context, we have found that when officers and agents develop partnerships with members of a particular community, they obtain cultural, religious, and linguistic insights that aid both in crime prevention and effective policing.

But there are times when such self-gained insights are not enough. In order to reduce stereotypes, our workforce needs to better understand the cultures, values, customs and traditions of ethnic and religious communities. Dr. Margaret Nydell of Georgetown University states, “Perceptions become realities to the people who hold them, and people who

lack cross-cultural experience can easily misunderstand the attitudes and behaviors they confront.”⁸ We must work hard to ensure that these misperceptions and misunderstandings are addressed.

In this regard, we have found that providing law enforcement officers with education and training on cultural and religious traditions leads to greater understanding, and is useful in countering stereotypes and prejudice among public officials. The U.S. government has taken several important steps in this area. For example,

- The Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice has prepared an excellent CD-ROM for law enforcement officials on basic aspects of Arab and Muslim cultures;
- The DHS Office for Civil Rights & Civil Liberties has just finished taping a more in-depth training video on Arab and Muslim beliefs and cultures, which we will be releasing in the very near future; and
- Our Office and the Department of Justice have produced a series of posters on Muslim and Sikh religious head coverings, which provide basic guidance on how to interact with individuals wearing these garments.

We have sent thousands of these products to local, state, and Federal law enforcement officers throughout the country and the reviews have been extremely positive.

Forgive me for being redundant, but I must stress this point: educating government officials about cultural and religious minorities is not simply about being polite. While improving sensitivity and promoting tolerance, this training helps government employees do their jobs better. We repeatedly emphasize to our law enforcement colleagues that the training we offer is not what derisively is referred to as “political correctness or sensitivity training.” The training is a concrete, hard-nosed effort to help them do their jobs better. When they understand the cultures, values, and traditions of particular peoples whom they encounter, for example, at the border, they will have a better understanding of whether this is a person who can be admitted to our country. By the same token, displaying cultural and religious awareness helps minority communities feel connected to the government, making them more likely to engage and work as part of the process.

Recommendation 4: Whenever possible, Member States should promote inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious dialogue, even in the absence of conflicts.

Let me conclude by making a point about the benefits of inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious dialogue. But before I do so, I must admit that promoting such dialogue vis-à-vis distinct communities, as opposed to promoting dialogue with the government, is not a chief mission of our Office. The Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service is the U.S. government’s “peacemaker” for community conflicts and tensions arising from differences of race, color, and national origin.⁹ We are fortunate to have the Director of the

⁸ *Understanding Arabs* (Introduction: A message from Margaret Nydell) (2002)

⁹ www.usdoj.gov/crs

Community Relations Service, Sharee Freeman, with us as part of the U.S. delegation, and she can discuss her activities in more detail.

Nevertheless, I humbly submit that along with promoting tolerance and civic integration, a by-product of our public engagement efforts has been improving inter-community dialogue. Although we do occasionally meet with distinct groups, our practice is generally to meet with the Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian American communities together. While there are often different perspectives, our experience has been that these communities share similar concerns about issues such as hate crimes, employment discrimination, religious freedom, and racial profiling. While we cannot accept credit for this phenomenon, I think it is important to highlight the fact that the Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian American communities now regularly work together to lobby, educate, and, frankly, complain about the government. They support each other's causes; participate in each other's conventions; and recognize each other's achievements. And while the United States is fortunate in that there are relatively few tensions between these communities domestically, we do take comfort in the possibility, however remote, that this inter-community dialogue may help prevent future conflicts. At the very least, the level of support and cooperation between these communities is certainly a model others should follow.

Thank you.