



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Freedom of Religion in the OSCE

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Over the course of the last 12 months, the United States has taken the opportunity to address in the Permanent Council a number of issues thematically concerning implementation of our commitments. We have done so on Media Freedom, on Trafficking in Human Beings and on Corruption issues. I do so again today on the state of Freedom of Religion in the OSCE in the firm belief that this contributes to the broad dialogue we engage in weekly around this table. The freedom to practice one's chosen faith is of vital importance to the United States. It was a quest for religious freedom that motivated many of America's founders, and this remains fundamental to my country. As President Obama said in 2010, "The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in [our] country, and will not be treated differently by their government, is essential to who we are."

Today, throughout the world and indeed even here in the OSCE, governments and societies are struggling with rising religious diversity even as they are called upon to protect the fundamental rights of individuals in all communities who seek to practice their own religious beliefs.

As Secretary Clinton put it, "religious freedom provides a cornerstone for every healthy society." The right to believe or not to believe, and to practice one's convictions without fear of government interference or restriction, is a basic human right. Today, religious freedom is restricted in ways both overt and subtle in too many countries, including participating States. The annual U.S. State Department Report on International Religious Freedom, mandated by the U.S. Congress and available on the Internet, sets forth in considerable detail the different ways in which we encounter religious freedom restrictions. I want to highlight just a few of them.

The most severe abuses of religious freedom take place under authoritarian governments; those that seek to control all religious thought and expression as part of a more comprehensive determination to control all aspects of political and civic life. Some governments cite concerns about political security as a basis to repress peaceful religious practice. We see this today in the OSCE especially in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. In Tajikistan a proposed "draft law on the responsibilities of parents" would prohibit anyone under the age of 18 from participation in religious communities. We encourage the government of Tajikistan to remove this draft provision, which would constitute a serious violation of religious freedom. We note with concern that a de facto ban on women attending mosques is already in effect in Tajikistan.

Another concern is state hostility toward members of nontraditional and minority religious groups. Some governments intimidate and harass members of religious communities and tolerate societal abuses against them. Religious minorities in many participating States face numerous legal restrictions or administrative obstacles to practicing their faiths.

In some OSCE participating States, there is a failure to address forms of intolerance against certain religious groups. In these countries laws may discourage religious discrimination or persecution, but officials fail to prevent attacks, harassment, or other harmful acts against certain individuals or religious groups. We have seen this in the Russian Federation especially towards Jehovah's Witnesses, other members of non-Orthodox Christian denominations and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works. Protecting religious freedom requires more than simply having good laws and policies in place. Governments also have the responsibility to work at all levels to prevent abuses, to bring to justice those who commit crimes of violence, robustly implement and enforce anti-discrimination laws, to provide redress to victims when appropriate, and to foster an environment of respect and tolerance for all people.

We are also concerned by discriminatory legislation or concrete action that favors one or more religions over others. These circumstances often result from historical dominance by a particular religious group, and can result in institutionalized bias against new or historically repressed religious communities. In Turkmenistan the government restricts registered groups' ability to own property and print or import religious materials. There have been reports of raids and arbitrary detentions involving Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and other Protestants. In Uzbekistan, the only OSCE participating State deemed to be a Country of Particular Concern by the International Religious Freedom Report, the government fined a protestant leader for owning a Christian film and has seized bibles, videos and pamphlets used by Christian churches.

Some participating States discriminate against specific groups asserting they are illegitimate and dangerous to individuals or societal order. Government officials describe such groups as "cults" or "sects," thereby perpetuating the stigmatization of the members of these groups and encouraging or implicitly condoning acts of violence against them. This practice is relatively common even in countries where religious freedom is otherwise respected.

We also believe that participating States have a responsibility to promote tolerance and respect at a societal level. In the last year we have received reports, as detailed in our Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, of intolerable acts of anti-Semitic behavior and violence directed towards Jewish individuals and communities and negative stereotypes and discrimination directed against members of Muslim communities. Several States have discussed or enacted national or local bans on religious clothing, particularly the traditional Muslim head covering and veil, or other Islamic symbols. No country is immune to these types of acts, which regrettably have occurred in my country as well. What's important is the need to demonstrate a firm commitment to counteract intolerance by eliminating any impression that it enjoys any official status.

Finally, a number of participating States have worked during OSCE meetings to advance the concept of "defamation of religions." While the United States deplores actions that exhibit disrespect for deeply held religious beliefs, we do not agree with the "defamation of religions" concept because it can be used to undermine the fundamental freedoms of religion and expression.

The United States believes that the best way for governments to address these issues is to develop robust legal regimes to address acts of discrimination and bias-inspired crime; to condemn hateful ideology and proactively reach out to all religious communities, especially minority groups; and to defend vigorously the rights of individuals to practice their religion freely and to exercise their freedom of expression.

For this reason we are currently working to find an alternative to the current defamation of religions resolution at the UN Human Rights Council that would garner widespread support and would redirect energies from a polarizing debate to an action-oriented approach, based on shared principles, which would address the increasing concerns of individuals targeted because of their religion. We were impressed by the call for action in OIC Secretary Ihsanoglu's speech delivered at the 15th session of the Human Rights Council, to address discrimination, violence, and hostility without seeking to limit-freedoms of expression or of religion. We hope that the eight action points from this speech can form the basis of a new, broadly supported, action oriented approach.

As President Obama said last year, "Let us pledge our constant support to all who struggle against religious oppression and rededicate ourselves to fostering peace with those whose beliefs differ from our own."

Thank you Mr. Chairman.