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INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC POLICY

**Intervention of
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**OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
Freedom of the Media: Protection of Journalists and Access to Information
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The recent episode regarding the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed and the subsequent violent reactions across the Islamic world raised the attention of the global community to the misconceptions and lack of educated awareness within the media on matters relating to religion and belief.

In all societies, there is a need for the media to act with sensitivity and responsibility when addressing issues of special significance for the adherents of any faith.

We fully uphold the right of free speech while understanding the reasons behind the widespread indignation in the Muslim world regarding the cartoons. We believe freedom of the press entails responsibility and discretion, and should respect the beliefs and tenets of all religions and beliefs.

Co-existence calls for a climate of mutual respect. All parties must refrain from any form of violence and avoid fuelling hatred. States must promote the interrelated and indivisible nature of human rights and freedoms and advocate the use of appropriate legal and civil society remedies, as well as pursue peaceful dialogue on matters which profoundly effect the heart and spirit of all multicultural societies.

The Institute on Religion and Public Policy has been working in close cooperation and interactive partnership with religious communities, non-governmental organizations, diplomats and members of the media to draft, develop, and advance a Charter On Freedom Of Expression and Journalistic Ethics in Relation to Respect for Religion or Belief.

This draft charter was created by taking into account over 40 national journalistic ethics codes, more than 300 professional journalist codes, and relevant documents articulating OSCE, Council of Europe and UN standards. We also incorporated suggestions and concerns articulated by NGOs and diplomats in meetings we held to discuss the Charter.

There is a compelling need for a Universal Charter for the media, as no such universal standards linking journalistic ethics, the right freedom of religion or belief and the right to freedom of expression exist. Indeed, most national and journalistic society codes barely address ethical measures in the area of religion and belief.

In light of the grave importance of an issue such as this one, I have brought copies of the Charter for your review. They are available on the NGO table. I firmly believe that the direct input, participation, and partnership of the OSCE would be invaluable in developing constructive and universally applicable standards that would support both the right to freedom of expression and religion and assist in creating an environment of religious understanding and non-discrimination.

Reactions to religious images perceived as being inaccurate and stereotypical that are transmitted through the media have engendered widespread debate about the interaction between respect for religious beliefs and freedom of expression. Questions have also been raised on the issues of media responsibility, self-regulation and self-censorship.

Indeed, in Resolution 1510 passed just a few weeks ago by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe entitled "Freedom of Expression and Respect for Religious Beliefs", the Assembly invited media professionals and their professional organizations to discuss media ethics with regard to religious beliefs and sensitivities and encouraged the creation of press complaints bodies, media ombudspersons or other self-regulatory bodies, where such bodies do not yet exist, and which should discuss possible remedies for offences to religious persuasions.

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance pointed out soon after the Danish episode, international mechanisms must treat cases such as the Danish cartoons not as a clash of civilizations but as a debate on the balancing of two rights, freedom of expression and freedom of religion. The law, he stressed, could not provide a satisfactory answer. It must be accompanied by much thought and consideration on the need for inter-religious, inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue, something that the OSCE, through its human dimension capacity and politically binding commitments relating to the human dimension, should be instrumental in fostering.

The Charter on Freedom of Expression and Journalistic Ethics in Relation to Respect for Religion or Belief can serve as the impetus to such a dialogue within the OSCE to further advance the cause of media and religious understanding.