



United States Mission to the OSCE

Working Session 7 Freedom of Religion or Belief II

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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, September 26, 2013

During the past year, we have witnessed rising religious intolerance—particularly against Muslims and Jews—within the OSCE region. Research indicates that societal intolerance and discrimination often manifest against multiple minority groups simultaneously. Thus, where there is hatred toward Jews, there is also hatred towards Muslims. The OSCE must continue to shine a light on all intolerance and discrimination.

At the June 2013 OSCE conference in Berlin, participants noted anti-Semitism is a threat to security in the OSCE region and that Jewish communities are in need of protection. At the conference, Chairman-in-office Kozhara stated, “Violent anti-Semitic incidents ... cannot be tolerated anymore; they should be prevented in advance and by all means.” Emphasizing this point, Personal Representative of the Chair-in-Office Rabbi Baker said, “Governments have an obligation to protect their citizens and to permit the free exercise of religion, but these essential commitments are now being challenged in a growing number of countries where Jewish communities feel besieged.”

In my own country, nearly two out of three religion-based hate crimes are committed against Jews. In Hungary, anti-Semitic rhetoric and outrageous statements by Jobbik party leaders still sometimes go unchallenged by the government. In Greece, the neo-Nazi political party Golden Dawn—with 18 seats in Parliament—has repeatedly been linked to activities directed against members of minority religions. The number of recorded anti-Semitic attacks in France increased by 58 percent in 2012.

Following the horrific murder of a British soldier in Woolwich, U.K. in May by an extremist Muslim, in a two-week period alone, there were more than 16 attacks on mosques and other religious sites. In Switzerland, minarets continue to be banned across the board. Reports indicate that Muslim women are increasingly the targets of social hostility in Europe. In France, 85 percent of reported anti-Muslim attacks in 2012 were against women, and in other countries the percentage is similar.

While 35 participating States have reported they collect data on hate crimes motivated by religious bias, they have not provided this information to ODIHR. Without accurate data, we are left with an inaccurate picture of the problem. We therefore urge countries within the OSCE region to utilize ODIHR’s Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Unit, its vital Annual Hate Crimes Report, and its Practice Guide on Hate Crime Laws more extensively and more effectively. We also support ODIHR’s push for training to ensure that police have the necessary skills and understanding to address religiously motivated hate crimes. We welcome the call by the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights for governments to “stop targeting Muslims through legislation or policy.”

The picture is not entirely bleak, however, and there are positive actions to combat religious intolerance as well, coming from both civil society and government. In Sweden, non-Muslim women donned hijabs in support of a pregnant Muslim woman who was beaten in August. In the face of rising anti-Semitism in Hungary, a record 10,000 people took part in the annual March of the Living to commemorate victims of Holocaust. Prime Minister Antonis Samaras became the first Greek Prime Minister in more than a century to visit a synagogue, when he took part in the commemoration at Monastiriote Synagogue of the 1943 deportation of Jews to Nazi concentration camps. His action sent a powerful message of “Never Again.”

Clearly, there is much work to be done, both by government and by civil society. The trends noted during this conference demonstrate the need for concerted, concrete action against religious intolerance in all its forms. We welcome the opportunity to work with like-minded governments and organizations to address the challenge together.