



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 7: Strategies for promoting tolerance and understanding, interethnic and intercultural dialogue, including with respect to religion, in the OSCE area

As prepared for delivery by Mr. Martin Raffel,
to the High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination
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Mr. Moderator,

The United States attaches great importance to promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including combating unlawful discrimination and intolerance.

As mentioned in previous sessions, the U.S. government endorses multiple tracks to combat the underlying bigotry that fuels violence and discrimination in the OSCE region. Robust governmental policies in this area and concrete actions in furtherance of such policies are absolutely critical. At the same time, civil society must also be a partner in helping to create and support communities that not only tolerate religious and ethnic diversity, but enthusiastically embrace it.

I am privileged to be here today as a public delegate representing my country. Back home, I have served for almost twenty three years as a senior professional at a national Jewish community relations organization. Time and again I have personally witnessed the power of interfaith and intergroup relations to transform attitudes. The simple act of engaging in open and honest dialogue across religious and ethnic lines itself has value. But its bigotry-reducing impact would be dramatically enhanced if innovative ideas and "best practices" emanating from such dialogue were to be matched with resources enabling implementation of proven strategies.

As representatives of the American Jewish community, we look to nurture relationships with Christians and Muslims, with African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Arabs -- in fact, with the whole spectrum of American society. Together, in coalition, we work to build an America that not only meets the needs of all our citizens, but an America that also acts responsibly in the global context as well.

We stand up for each other without hesitation or equivocation -- because it is the right thing to do and because we are friends. When Muslim Americans suffered verbal and physical attacks in the wake of 9/11, we denounced Islamophobia in no uncertain terms. And when Jews are the targets of hatred and terrorist violence, Christian and Muslim friends arise to our defense. It is not unusual or extraordinary. Just friends being friends.

There is another key strategy -- and a collective responsibility of government and civil society -- that I would like to emphasize: combating violent hate crimes. The United States is working to improve our own mechanisms to combat hate crimes, and we urge participating States to take steps to implement their commitments to combat hate crimes as well.

This means introducing an adequate legislative framework; establishing systems of monitoring and reporting of incidents; and implementing police training, educational, and community engagement programs that would contribute to a more robust response to this problem. These are all steps that have long been a part of the increasing body of OSCE commitments, including in the 2009 Ministerial Decision on Combating Hate Crime.

Government leaders must send clear signals to police and prosecutors about the importance of combating violent hate crimes, ensuring that those responsible for such crimes are held accountable under the law, and that the record of accountability is well documented and publicized.

The United States has adopted an inclusive approach to combating hate crimes, recognizing that hate crimes are perpetrated against individuals because of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, disability, and other similar factors.

As I mentioned previously, civil society organizations and human rights defenders have a vital role to play in our joint efforts to strengthen tolerance within our respective societies, and we warmly welcome their participation at the conference this week. Governments should support and promote the work of human rights defenders in the OSCE region. We must ensure that civil society activists receive appropriate protection from private acts of violence and harassment perpetrated by racist and intolerant groups or individuals, and, in addition, are not subjected to violence, malicious prosecution, or other official attempts to silence and repress them.

My wife and I have two wonderful children--bearing and raising children, in my mind, represents the ultimate act of optimism. I must admit that when I look around at what is happening in the world today -- the hatred, the violence -- I am frightened for myself, but even more so for them. For the sake of all the world's children, governments and civil society organizations must join hands to intensify our efforts in the years ahead.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.