



The State Dept., Islam, and Freedom of Religion

In a few days, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) will meet in Washington with the express intention of building “muscles of respect and empathy and tolerance.” The invitation to meet in Washington was extended in July, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed the OIC during its meeting in Istanbul, Turkey. However, despite the trappings of talk about tolerance, implementation of the OIC’s agenda would restrict the free speech around the globe.



According to its [website](#) the OIC perceives itself to be *the* voice of the Muslim world:

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (formerly Organization of the Islamic Conference) is the second largest inter-governmental organization after the United Nations which has membership of 57 states spread over four continents. The Organization is the collective voice of the Muslim world and ensuring to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world.

The OIC is also quick to link its own structure to the dreams of those who would see the whole of Islam — the Ummah — gathered as a political force, as it once was under the caliphate: “The Organization has the singular honor to galvanize the Ummah into a unified body and have actively represented the Muslims by espousing all causes close to the hearts of over 1.5 billion Muslims of the world.”

When Clinton was [speaking to the OIC](#) “High-Level Meeting on Combating Religious Intolerance” last July, she reminisced about the days when her husband was president, and catered to the universalistic notion of the equivalence of all religions:

In our conversation 15 years ago, I remember the secretary general talking about the imperative for us to move beyond these differences and how much the three great monotheistic religions have in common, especially our respective commandments to love our neighbors and to seek peace and understanding. Well, today, this wisdom that is ageless is as important as ever.

And, lest anyone imagine that the liberties enjoyed in the West were more advanced than those enjoyed in the Islamic world, Clinton pandered to her audience, “And in established democracies, we are still working to protect fully our religious diversity, prevent discrimination, and protect freedom of expression.”

But what does the OIC desire when it comes to preventing ‘discrimination’? The fundamental abridgment of the free speech guaranteed under the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. As Nina Shea and Paul Marshall [recently wrote for the Wall Street Journal](#):

For more than 20 years, the OIC has pressed Western governments to restrict speech about Islam. Its charter commits it “to combat defamation of Islam,” and its current action plan calls for “deterrent punishments” by all states to counter purported Islamophobia.



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In 2009, the “International Islamic Fiqh [Jurisprudence] Academy,” an official OIC organ, issued fatwas calling for free speech bans, including “international legislation” aimed at protecting “the interests and values of [Islamic] society,” and for judicial punishment for public expression of apostasy from Islam. OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu emphasizes that “no one has the right to insult another for their beliefs.”

The OIC does not define what speech should be outlawed, but its leading member states’ practices are illustrative. Millions of Baha’is and Ahmadis, religious movements arising after Muhammad, are condemned as de facto “insulters” of Islam, frequently persecuted by OIC governments, and attacked by vigilantes. Those seeking to leave Islam face similar fates.

The Obama administration has already undermined the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of religion by speaking of a far narrower, “freedom of worship”— while religion influences every area of life, a [“freedom of worship”](#) is much more narrow, and could be restricted to activities specifically designated as worship-related. According to Shea and Marshall, many nations of the European Union are already succumbing to OIC pressure to restrict the free exercise of speech regarding the terrors of Islam:

OIC pressure on European countries to ban “negative stereotyping of Islam” has increased since the 2004 murder of Theo Van Gogh for his film “Submission” and the Danish Muhammad cartoon imbroglio of 2005. Many countries (such as France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, Italy and Sweden), hoping to ensure social peace, now prosecute people for “vilifying” Islam or insulting Muslims’ religious feelings.

Encouraging a more civil discourse is commendable, and First Amendment freedoms mean the U.S. won’t veer down Europe’s path anytime soon. But if the Obama administration is committed to defending constitutional rights, why is it, as the OIC’s Mr. Ihsanoglu wrote in the Turkish Weekly after the Istanbul meeting, standing “united” on speech issues with an organization trying to undercut our freedoms? Mr. Ihsanoglu celebrates this partnership even while lamenting in his op-ed that America permits “Islamophobia” under “the banner of freedom of expression.”

Despite such constitutional guarantees, any capitulation to the agenda of the OIC could have a chilling effect on the exercise of religious liberty. And the fondness which the Clinton State Department has shown for Islamist political parties only heightens the fundamental tension between catering to the OIC’s intention to empower the “Ummah” and the responsibilities of every element of the federal government to uphold the Constitution.

As [reported](#) for *The New American* in early November, the Obama administration has alligned itself with Islamist parties in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” which toppled several less-overtly religious dictatorships and replaced them with ideologues bent on imposing more stringent interpretations of sharia law on their subjects. Thus, for example, [a November 8 article](#) for the Associated Press noted that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “welcomed the Islamist party Ennahda’s strong showing in ‘an open, competitive election’ in Tunisia.” The results of Egypt’s first round of parliamentary elections have left Clinton somewhat less impressed; [a December 6 AP article](#) quotes a more sober assessment of the state of affairs in Egypt: “Transitions require fair and inclusive elections, but they also demand the embrace of democratic norms and rules. We expect all democratic actors to uphold universal human rights, including women’s rights, to allow free religious practice.” In short, it appears that democracy is not quite so appealing when it fails to deliver the anticipated results. The results of democracy in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” may be pleasing to the OIC, but for those who have to live under the



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rule of Islamist parties that would punish blasphemy and apostasy from Islam, democracy has most certainly not brought liberty.



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