

Condemn Hate Speech, Fight Violence and Protect Freedom of Expression

A Joint Statement by Human Rights First and the Muslim Public Affairs Council

■ Hate speech against Muslims must be taken seriously.

Hate speech that intends to degrade, intimidate or incite violence against someone based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation or disability is harmful. In many parts of the world, there is a rise of hate speech against Muslims. Often, anti-Muslim prejudice is preceded by the malicious intent of dehumanizing Muslims and denigrating the prophet Muhammad or the Quran. We are also aware that hateful words can all too easily lead to physical attacks on Muslims and set off a cycle of violence.

■ Hatred must be fought through non legal means, with responsible speech.

However harsh and difficult the marketplace of ideas may be at times, it is most effective to uphold one's ideas through one's right to free speech. The capacity of each individual to express his/her own views must not be threatened. The best way to counter hatred is to defy it through convincing arguments, good actions and free debate. Much can be done to fight hatred without restricting speech, and governments should condemn hatred and set the example. Any legislation that restricts free speech including religious symbols can be used to quell social and political dissent.

■ Violence as a response to speech is unacceptable.

Violence in response to speech is never acceptable. The feeling of being offended by hateful speech can never justify a self-proclaimed right to express violent behavior or to cause bloodshed. Countless incidents show that when governments or religious movements seek to punish offenses, in the name of combating religious bigotry, violence then ensues and real violations of human rights are perpetrated against targeted individuals. It is important to note that the largest group of victims at the hands of Muslim extremists are Muslims, with their mosques and homes and schools used as primary targets of violence.

■ “Defamation of religions” or blasphemy laws do not protect individuals—they harm them.

Human rights protect individuals, not abstract ideas or social norms. Religious symbols do not need the enforcement mechanisms of governments or international bodies to defend them. The reaction to hatred at times leads to other oppressive measures, such as blasphemy laws, inevitably violating human rights of religious minorities and vulnerable segments of societies. Governments and individuals frequently abuse national blasphemy laws to stifle dissent and debate, harass rivals, legitimize mob violence, and settle petty disputes. The loose and unclear language of these laws empowers majorities against dissenters and the state against individuals. They provide a context in which governments can restrict freedom of expression, thought, and religion, and this can result in devastating consequences for those holding religious views that differ from the majority religion, as well as for adherents to minority faiths.

■ The United Nations must uphold freedom of expression.

With the violent protests in the Middle East that led to bloodshed in September 2012, there is the imminent risk that groups or governments wish to reinvigorate the idea of adopting international legislation against insulting religion at the 2012 United Nations General Assembly. We warn against this and we oppose this way forward. Rather than criminalizing speech, U.N. member states should step up their commitments to fighting hate crimes, countering hateful discourse, opposing discrimination and promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Governments need to raise their voices in responsible speech as response to hate speech. They also need to develop practical steps to combat all forms of intolerance, including hatred against Muslims, without restricting speech.