

OPINION | DECEMBER 5, 2011

The State Department vs. Free Speech

Hillary Clinton chats up the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which demands world-wide bans on criticizing Islam.

By [NINA SHEA AND PAUL MARSHALL](#)

Last July in Istanbul, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton co-chaired a “High-Level Meeting on Combating Religious Intolerance” with the Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Mrs. Clinton invited the OIC to Washington for a conference to build “muscles of respect and empathy and tolerance.” That conference is scheduled for Dec. 12 through Dec. 14.

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.

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.

Muslim reformers are widely and specifically targeted for supposedly anti-Islamic speech. In Afghanistan, Ali Mohaqeq Nasab, editor of “Haqooq-i-Zen” (“Women’s Rights”) magazine, was imprisoned by the Karzai government for publishing “un-Islamic” articles criticizing stoning as a punishment for adultery. In Iran, Ayatollah Boroujerdi was imprisoned for arguing that “political leadership by clergy” was contrary to Islam. In Bangladesh, Salahuddin Choudhury was imprisoned for hurting “religious feelings” by advocating peaceful relations between Bangladesh and Israel.

Egypt bans books and imprisons Muslims whose views are contrary to the state-funded Sunni center, Al-Azhar. Others are similarly punished for deviating from locally dominant Islamic sects not only in repressive Pakistan and Sudan, but also in Indonesia, Malaysia, Algeria and other ostensibly moderate countries.

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.”

President Obama should put a stop to this nonsense and declare that in free societies all views and religions are subject to contradiction and critique—and the OIC must learn to tolerate that. The alternative is what the late Indonesian Muslim President Abdurrahman Wahid called “a narrow suffocating chamber of dogmatism.”

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