

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) advocated for the autonomy of religious institutions facing government interference as part of the official U.S. delegation to the OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on freedom of religion or belief, July 9-10 in Vienna, Austria.

Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair, gave the official U.S. intervention in the second session on the Status of Religious or Belief Communities.

“A society’s fear of terrorism should not be used to deprive any congregations of the ability to participate in the choosing of their religious leaders, either through banning such choices outright or using government-appointed boards,” said Mr. Leo, in his [statement](#) .

During a private event hosted by USCIRF, Leonard Leo expressed support for a OSCE Ministerial decision in late 2009 in which the 56 OSCE participating states would reiterate their commitment to uphold OSCE human rights pledges on freedom of religion or belief. Delegates from Germany, Great Britain, Greece, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Sweden took part in this event. Also participating at the event and at the OSCE conference were USCIRF vice-chairs Elizabeth H. Prodromou and Michael Cromartie, and commissioners Felice Gaer and Talal Eid.

Imam Eid presented [USCIRF’s findings](#) at a Freedom House side event on Central Asia.

“The United States should encourage the Central Asian governments to cooperate more fully with the OSCE—particularly with the recommendations on draft legislation of its Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief—to find ways to maximize rather than hobble vital protections on religious freedom, especially since Kazakhstan is due to chair the organization in 2010 and will serve as an example for the other 55 OSCE states,” said Imam Eid.

Commissioners held bilateral meetings with the OSCE’s Chairman-in-Office’s Personal Representative on Combating Anti-Semitism and the OSCE’s Chairman-in-Office’s Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination towards Muslims. The latter was encouraged to examine the status of Muslims in Uzbekistan as well as that of the Alevi, a Muslim minority group in Turkey.

Also, commissioners held bilateral meetings with several OSCE delegations, including those from Turkey, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Commissioners also met with representatives

of the OSCE Council and Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders.

“The OSCE is an important multilateral organization, and it has established critical commitments on freedom of religion or belief as a basic element of human rights,” said Mr. Leo. “We appreciated being a part of the U.S. delegation and are grateful for the support the U.S. Mission to OSCE has provided for our meetings. We believe that the United States should continue to maintain a firm and steadfast commitment to the organization and its work on religious freedom, including through the Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.”

The OSCE is a multilateral organization with 56 participating states, including the United States and Canada, and all the countries of Europe and Eurasia.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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