

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - In advance of the upcoming vote on this issue in the UN General Assembly, USCIRF today issued the following Policy Focus explaining the problems with the idea that religions should be protected from “defamation.”

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, countries from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) have been working through the United Nations system to advance the problematic idea that there should be laws against the so-called “defamation of religions.” Although touted as a solution to the very real problems of religious persecution and discrimination, the OIC-sponsored UN resolutions on this issue instead provide justification for governments to restrict religious freedom and free expression. They also provide international legitimacy for existing national laws that punish blasphemy or otherwise ban criticism of a religion, which often have resulted in gross human rights violations. These resolutions deviate sharply from universal human rights standards by seeking to protect religious institutions and interpretations, rather than individuals, and could help create a new international anti-blasphemy norm.

In addition to seeking a new norm through these resolutions, OIC countries have argued in various UN contexts that existing international standards prohibiting advocacy of hatred and incitement already outlaw “defamation of religions.” However, the provisions on which they rely—Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)—provide only limited exceptions to the fundamental freedoms of expression and religion. These provisions were intended to protect individuals from violence or discrimination, not to protect religious institutions or ideas from criticism, and they should not be expanded to cover allegedly religiously defamatory speech. Such an expansion, which unfortunately may have been lent support by new language on negative religious stereotyping and incitement in a recent UN Human Rights Council freedom of expression resolution, would undermine international human rights guarantees, including the freedom of religion. It also would undermine the institutions that protect universal human rights worldwide.

Please [click here](#) to download USCIRF Policy Focus - The Dangerous Idea of Protecting Religions from “Defamation”

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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