The following article, written by Emily Belz, appeared in World on September 13, 2012 at http://www.worldmag.com/2012/09/blasphemy_revisited

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NEW YORK - The Wednesday morning after Egyptians overran the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, the embassy affirmed its statement condemning, not the violence, but the supposed incitement: an American video that attacks Islam. "The Embassy of the United States in Cairo condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims - as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions," read the statement, put out before protestors breached the embassy compound. After the violence, the embassy tweeted that its statement "still stands." President Obama said he didn't approve the statement and later that day the embassy removed the statement from its site and deleted its tweet affirming the statement. The Cairo statement sent a contradictory message from an administration that has fought to push back blasphemy laws in the Muslim world. Religious freedom advocates in Washington have had plenty of criticism for the Obama administration in how it has handled the plight of religious minorities experiencing the "Arab Spring." But on the issue of fighting blasphemy laws, religious freedom advocates have offered plaudits to the administration.

Blasphemy laws, broadly speaking, punish those who "offend" Muslims or insult Islam. For a decade, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed defamation resolutions - nonbinding blasphemy laws - that the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a coalition of Muslim states, introduced. The resolutions rendered "defamation of religion" a human rights violation.

Though the annual defamation resolution was nonbinding, it was troublesome.

"It can create a presumption or feeling that this is an international norm," said Elizabeth Cassidy, who researches policy with the
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
and has followed the resolutions closely. "It gave cover for countries that had bad blasphemy laws."

For a decade, the Bush administration and the Obama administration lobbied behind the scenes to end the defamation resolutions at the UN. The votes for the defamation law began to decline, until under Obama's administration, it was only passing by a handful of votes.

In 2011, the U.S. State Department celebrated after the OIC didn't introduce its annual defamation resolution at all. Cassidy thinks the attention on blasphemy laws that year, with the assassinations of blasphemy law opponents Salman Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti in Pakistan, helped erode support for the resolution. (Pakistan's blasphemy laws still stand.)

The OIC, instead of introducing the defamation resolution, signed onto a new resolution, which the United States drafted (download a PDF of the new resolution). The new resolution condemns "incitement," but doesn't criminalize speech like the defamation resolutions did. Instead, it talks about "fostering dialogue" and "encouraging training." The resolution passed last year and this year at both the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, which is meeting in Geneva even now.

Open Doors International, a non-governmental organization (NGO) for persecuted Christians that has worked hard against the defamation resolutions, is pleased with the new resolution even if it isn't a perfect product.

"I don't expect a flawless resolution anytime soon, due to the makeup of the UN and the huge variety in opinions," said Aire de Pater, who does UN advocacy for the group. "So, this is a compromise text with room for improvement."

"It's so much better than defamation," said Cassidy. "It's more protective of hate speech than European hate speech laws."

In the midst of the Middle East furor on Wednesday, Obama's deputy national security advisor Denis McDonough spoke at the International Religious Freedom Conference at Catholic University, where he brought up blasphemy laws.

"We have continued to oppose efforts, including at the United Nations, to ban the so-called 'defamation of religion' because we believe that such measures, including blasphemy laws, can be wielded to silence free expression and suppress religious minorities," he said, adding that the new resolution the United States brought about "recognizes that the open debate of ideas and interfaith dialogue can be among the best protections against religious intolerance."

Following the events in Libya and Egypt, religious freedom experts are keeping close tabs on whether Islamic countries will attempt to change the language of the resolution and move back toward language outlawing blasphemy. The height of support for the defamation resolutions, Cassidy said, was in 2006 during the controversy over the Danish cartoons of Muhammad.

"The malevolent idea that the proper response to defamation of religion is criminal prosecution, let alone violence or murder, is a dangerous problem in the Muslim-majority world," Tom Farr, the director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom under President George W. Bush, said on Wednesday. "This toxic attitude - that anyone offending Islam must be punished - is responsible for many of the growing numbers of attacks on religious minorities worldwide."

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