



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

May 2022

# ANTI-MUSLIM POLICIES AND BIAS IN EUROPE

Nadine Maenza  
*Chair*

Nury Turkel  
*Vice Chair*

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Anurima Bhargava

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Erin D. Singshinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

On February 9, 2022, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) hosted a [virtual hearing on Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe](#), an issue impacting members of the Ahmadiyya, Sunni, Shi'a, and all Muslim communities in Europe.



USCIRF Chair [Nadine Maenza](#) led the hearing, convening six witnesses who represented a variety of perspectives. She opened with descriptions of the anti-Muslim bias and restrictive legislation that violates the religious freedom of members of Muslim communities in Europe. These biases manifest through laws, discrimination in public institutions, prejudice in the immigration process, online harassment, and violent attacks, which [peaked in 2017 across 29 member states](#) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).



USCIRF Vice Chair [Nury Turkel](#) highlighted that anti-Muslim bias in Europe is grounded in centuries of essentializing discourse that paints Islam and Muslim communities as the West's existential "other." This "othering" intensified after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and other attacks committed in the name of Islam. European governments started adopting policies that institutionalized suspicion of Muslims. Discriminatory restrictions on the ways in which individuals choose to worship, observe, practice, or teach their religion or belief are contradictory to international human rights standards.



Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, [Rashad Hussain](#), emphasized the connection between anti-Muslim hatred and societal trends, including the rise of populism, nationalism, and the increased use of xenophobic language in the political sphere. Muslims along with Jews and other religious and ethnic minority groups face growing threats of violence from racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism, called REMVE. Violent extremist actors who are motivated by intolerance and ethno-supremacist ideologies, particularly white supremacy, are diffusely organized. They capitalize on societal grievances through technology to further their hateful and intolerant agendas. Ambassador Hussain closed his statement by expressing an eagerness to work with European governments to address these issues.



[Christie Edwards](#), Deputy Head of the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Department of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and [Sabrina Saoudi](#), Advisor on Intolerance Against Muslims at OSCE ODIHR, shared

ODIHR's findings. Ms. Edwards noted:

- Despite OSCE participating states' strong condemnation of racial and ethnic hatred, anti-Muslim hatred, antisemitism, xenophobia, and discrimination, numerous hate crimes against members of minority communities occur across the OSCE region.
- Civil society organizations addressing anti-Muslim hatred, racism, and xenophobia are often themselves victims of hate crimes by association.
- There is a need for further dialogue and coalition-building between governments, faith groups, and civil society. ODIHR convenes international events regularly to address hate crimes, intolerance, and discrimination.



[Sabrina Saoudi](#) discussed the recent challenges Muslim communities faced in the COVID-19 pandemic and provided an overview of ODIHR's tools and resources to address intolerance against Muslims:

- Since the beginning of the pandemic, toxic narratives espoused by state and non-state actors emerged and often blamed Muslims for spreading the virus.
- Women are victims of pandemic-related gender-based hate crimes, with single and multiple bias motivations in which gender intersects with race and ethnicity.
- ODIHR published a guide on "Understanding Anti-Muslim Hate Crime and Addressing the Security Needs of Muslim Communities," which offers practical steps that governments — in cooperation with Muslim communities — can take to prevent and respond to anti-Muslim hate crimes and better address the security challenges Muslim communities face.
- "The safety of Muslim communities is the responsibility of governments, and ODIHR can help governments confront the specific challenges posed by intolerance against Muslims," Ms. Saoudi stated.



[Rim-Sarah Alouane](#), Constitutional Legal Scholar at the University Toulouse-Capitole, presented the legal treatment of Islam and Muslims in France, and the impact of legislation and policies on French Muslims. Since the arrival of the Muslim population

in metropolitan France after decolonization, France has struggled with concerns over its national identity. The concept "laïcité" was first intended to guarantee strict neutrality and freedom of religion or belief. Laïcité implies that the state should not interfere with religious matters and vice versa. Consequently, religious neutrality is imposed upon any person working for the state; however, its use has resulted in a toughening of the legislative narrative on religious signs and symbols:

- **Law No. 2004-228 of March 2004:** The Law Prohibiting the Wearing of Conspicuous Religious Signs in Public Schools
- **Law No 2010-1192 of October 2010:** The Law prohibiting the Concealment of the Face in the Public Space
- **July 2016:** Attempts to ban the wearing of the burkini through local governments
- **Law No. 2021-1109 of August 2021:** The Law Consolidating the Respect for Republican Values

Most recently in January 2022, while debating the law on the democratization of sports, the French Senate adopted an amendment that prohibited the wearing of conspicuous religious signs during sports competitions. This targets female Muslim athletes wearing a headscarf. Ms. Alouane argued that France's political parties have joined forces to make Muslims, specifically Muslim women, disappear from the public square using the tenuous grounds of "public order disturbances" and "laïcité." She said the transformation and weaponization of laïcité, from a liberal to an illiberal legal tool to restrict religious freedom, has allowed the elite public discourse to constantly question Muslim loyalty to France.

Ms. Alouane recommended the U.S. government:

- Participate in a joint American-French commission that holds regular meetings with experts, leaders, and activists in the Muslim community to discuss the issues they face and make reasonable policies to address them.



[Zara Mohammed](#), Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), discussed the pervasive and institutional nature of Islamophobia in Britain:

- MCB's Center for Media Monitoring analyzed 10,000 articles and broadcast clips between October and December 2018 and found that 59 percent of all articles, and 43 percent of all broadcast clips, associated with Muslims were negative.
- It is essential to clearly define the term "Islamophobia," which is rooted in, but a separate category of racism. Islamophobia is a type of racism that targets the expression of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.
- Law enforcement does not record Islamophobia as a type of racism or discrimination, which results in the underreporting of Islamophobic hate crimes and distrust of the justice system.
  - Between the years 2018 and 2019, 47 percent of all recorded religious hate crime offenses in England and Wales were targeted against those who were perceived to be Muslim.
- In the past 20 years, a range of legislation has been passed to prevent terrorism:
  - In practice, the Prevent Duty — a statutory requirement for all public bodies as part of the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015 — requires schools and colleges, for example, to identify children and young people who may be vulnerable to radicalization.
- Muslim women who choose to wear a hijab, niqab, or jilbab are the primary targets for hate crimes, demonstrating how Islamophobia is highly gendered.
- High-level politicians reinforce hateful rhetoric. After United Kingdom's Prime Minister Boris Johnson referred to veiled Muslim women as "letterboxes" and "bank robbers," Islamophobic incidents and attacks targeting Muslims increased by 375% in one week.

Ms. Mohammed ended her testimony on a hopeful note, with a description of the Visit My Mosque project, in which 250 mosques across the UK open their doors and invite their neighbors of all faiths to build bridges with the local Muslim community.



[Dr. Péter Krekó](#), the Director of Political Capital Institute, addressed the anti-Muslim sentiments and disinformation that has become commonplace in Hungary:

According to the Pew Research data, Muslims comprise only 0.4 percent of Hungary's population. Due to the lack of a large, visible Muslim community, average Hungarians do not encounter Islam in their everyday life. This changed in 2015 when an unprecedented number of asylum seekers passed through the country. Fidesz, Hungary's governing party, used immigration and Muslims to exploit the objection of Hungarian society to "others," which is traditionally common in Central and Eastern European countries. Fidesz took advantage of the political opportunity and the centralized media system to spread disinformation campaigns based on hate-inciting rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and fake news. This hateful rhetoric stirs up Hungary's xenophobic attitudes towards non-Hungarians.

The Hungarian government's immigration and foreign policies are more pragmatic than political rhetoric suggests. The Hungarian government builds close ties with countries of dominant Muslim cultural backgrounds, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey. Additionally, the Hungarian government issued more than 55,000 residency permits to guest workers from Muslim countries in 2020, alone. The anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric is less an ideological and religious commitment than it is a harmful political marketing product.



[Jasmin Mujanović](#), Political Scientist and Analyst of Southeast Europe, provided an overview of the historical origins of the Bosnian Genocide and the tensions currently rising in the region.

The Bosnian Genocide refers to the systematic campaign of extermination and expulsions of non-Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) during the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995, directed by the wartime leadership of the self-declared Republika Srpska (RS) entity. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Serb nationalist authorities targeted Bosnia Herzegovina's Bosniak "Bosnian Muslim" and the Croat communities

during this campaign. Today, the governments of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, in Serbia and the BiH's RS entity, respectively, take a revisionist and/or negationist posture concerning these events. Genocide triumphalism has become the norm through the valorization of perpetrators in mainstream media. Concurrently, the ongoing secessionist efforts of the Dodik regime in BiH represent a major continuation of the logic and politics of the Bosnian Genocide. The failure by the Milosevic regime to successfully annex the Bosnian territories, which were eventually to be incorporated into the RS entity, has remained a source of potential retaliation. The present-day efforts to break up the BiH state are a physical security threat to the Bosniak community.

There was a shared consensus amongst the witnesses that people from all faiths and nationalities had a collective responsibility to protect and support vulnerable communities from targeted physical violence, hateful political rhetoric, and discriminatory laws.

USCIRF recommends the U.S. government:

- Work with its European allies to better understand the issues related to anti-Muslim bias, and to document, assess, and work to amend laws that disproportionately and negatively affect Muslim communities in Europe;
- Partner with relevant American agencies, such as USCIRF, the State Department International Religious Freedom Office, and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, with other OSCE Countries' religious freedom and human rights bodies to convene annual formalized reviews of laws that disproportionately impact Muslim communities;
- Encourage and, when applicable, assist OSCE countries in the recognition, documentation, and reporting of anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents for domestic and OSCE statistics research purposes;
- Formalize a process to intentionally review international anti-Muslim policies and hate crimes within the State Department; and
- Host regular calls, roundtables, hearings, and briefings to discuss anti-Muslim bias in Europe, and its link with antisemitism.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Commissioners listed below were present at the hearing.



*Chair*  
*Nadine Maenza*



*Commissioner*  
*Anurima Bhargava*



*Commissioner*  
*Frederick A. Davie*



*Commissioner*  
*Khizr Khan*



*Commissioner*  
*Sharon Kleinbaum*

### Professional Staff

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**Danielle Ashbahian**  
*Supervisory Public Affairs Officer*

**Keely Bakken**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Dwight Bashir**  
*Director of Outreach and Policy*

**Susan Bishai**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**  
*Director of Research and Policy*

**Mingzhi Chen**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Patrick Greenwalt**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Gabrielle Hasenstab**  
*Communications Specialist*

**Roy Haskins**  
*Director of Finance and Operations*

**Thomas Kraemer**  
*Director of Human Resources*

**Kirsten Lavery**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Niala Mohammad**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Jason Morton**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Mohyeldin Omer**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Dylan Schexnaydre**  
*Victims List and Outreach Specialist*

**Jamie Staley**  
*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Zack Udin**  
*Researcher*

**Nina Ullom**  
*Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist*

**Madeline Velluro**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.