



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much Chair Maenza. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. As Chair Maenza has highlighted, many European governments have adopted restrictive, discriminatory legislation that violates the religious freedom of members of their Muslim communities.

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. States must take steps to purposefully address both intentional and indirect violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Anti-Muslim bias in Europe is grounded in centuries of essentializing discourse that paints Islam and Muslim communities as Europe's—or, more generally, the West's—existential “other.” Yet, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and other attacks, thereafter, committed in the name of Islam, marked a significant shift. Many European governments started adopting policies that institutionalized suspicion of Muslims. For example, in the United Kingdom, the government adopted a Counter-Extremism Strategy that included a “Prevent Approach.” The goal of the approach was to “prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.” But Muslim communities have stated that the policy [includes](#): “draconian and counter-productive provisions that curtail civil liberties, challenge Muslims’ participation in public life, continue to discriminate openly against Muslim communities and encourage spying on one another.”

The 2015 migrant crisis in Europe further exacerbated long-standing issues of anti-Muslim intolerance and discrimination. The UN Special Rapporteur notes that European states have denied citizenship to Muslim applicants, alleging the “incompatibility” of Muslim practices with “national values.” Indeed, some European governments utilize vaguely defined concerns over Muslim

communities’ “ability to integrate” as grounds for discrimination. The Special Rapporteur notes that in Hungary and Slovakia, leaders claim “publicly that Muslim migrants are ‘criminals,’ ‘impossible to integrate,’ not refugees but ‘Muslim invaders.’”

Recently, the spokesperson for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban stated that the potential accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the European Union presents a challenge in terms of integrating “a country with 2 million Muslims.” This discourse—labeling even Europe’s indigenous Muslims as “foreign”—mirrors narratives Yugoslav politicians used to justify the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. There should be no space for such rhetoric from government officials.

I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Maenza to introduce our witnesses.