**Defending Islam From Free Speech**

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By Robert C. Blitt

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http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/01/11/defending-islam-free-speech-muslim-oic-un-hate-speech-criticism-column/21609273/

The OIC, whose member states range from moderate U.S. allies such as Jordan to adversaries such as Iran, [describes](http://www.oicun.org/2/23/) itself as the world's largest international body after the United Nations. For more than a decade, "the collective voice of the Muslim world" has spread the belief that [any insult](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/30/united-nations-organization-of-islamic-cooperation_n_1927166.html) directed against the Muslim faith or its prophet demands absolute suppression. Quashing "defamation of Islam" is enshrined as [a chief objective](http://www.oicun.org/2/23/) in the organization's charter.

With countless internal resolutions, relentless [lobbying](http://blog.unwatch.org/index.php/category/defamation-of-religion/) of the international community and block voting on resolutions advocating a prohibition on defamation of religion at the U.N., the OIC continuously pushes to silence criticism of Islam.

Translated into practice inside Islamic nations and increasingly elsewhere, this toxic vision breeds contempt for freedom of religion and expression, justifies the killing of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and casts a pall of self-censorship over academia and the arts.

By building the expectation that dissent or insult merits suppression, groups such as the OIC and the Arab League have emboldened extremists to take protection of Islam to the next level. With the most authoritative Muslim voices prepared to denounce violence but not to combat the idea that Islam should be immune from criticism, a meaningful response to counteract the resulting violence continues to be glaringly absent.

An OIC statement released after a 2011 *Charlie Hebdo* issue "[guest-edited](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/charlie-hebdos-defiance-paris-attack/384286/)" by the prophet Mohammed typifies this troubling position: "[Publication](http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/topic/?t_id=5941&ref=2493&lan=en&x_key=hebdo) of the insulting cartoon ... was an outrageous act of incitement and hatred and abuse of freedom of expression. ... The publishers and editors of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine must assume full responsibility for their ... incitement of religious intolerance."

This ominously prescient declaration tepidly closed by [urging](http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_oic-condemns-french-magazine-for-insulting-prophet-muhammad_261736.html) that Muslims exercise restraint.

**Blasphemy is a crime**

Likewise, [after](http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/topic/?t_id=9661&t_ref=3843&lan=en) the attack last week, the OIC "strongly condemned the terrorist act," but quickly added "that such acts of terror only represent the criminal perpetrators."

It had nothing to say about the principle of free speech. Perhaps that is because blasphemous speech is a crime in a [vast arc of Islamic countries from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/28/which-countries-still-outlaw-apostasy-and-blasphemy/).

If the OIC, Arab League and Muslim states genuinely want to distance themselves and the religion of Islam from such ghastly acts of terror, they must reversethe years spent advancing the motive that spawned them. As a start, they should stop punishing their own citizens for failure to properly respect Islam.

Support for a prohibition on [defamation of religion](http://cnsnews.com/news/article/islamic-bloc-revives-drive-outlaw-religious-defamation-worldwide) must be decisively repudiated. To counteract the damage that has been done, OIC members should embrace the promotion of tolerance, including sponsorship of moderation and tolerance efforts in mosques and madrassas globally. The OIC and its members should compensate *Charlie Hebdo* and the victims' families.

Clinging to the position that a prohibition on defamation of Islam is somehow a justifiable and measured response to perceived insult will continue inciting attempts to silence critics.

With millions marching in France and increasing unrest across Europe focused on Muslim immigrants, let's hope the leaders of the Muslim world acknowledge that the effort to turn blasphemy into a crime has done more to breed religious intolerance than any cartoon or YouTube video.

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