**Islamic Bloc Raises UN ‘Anti-Religious Intolerance’ Measure Backed by Obama Administration**

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In contrast to the widespread support for freedom of expression following the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attack, there are fresh calls for a United Nations measure, which critics say seeks to limit speech considered “blasphemous.”

A senior diplomat with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) – the bloc of Islamic nations – tweeted Monday that the attack in Paris underlined the importance of “renewed commitment to resolution 16/18.”

The innocuous-sounding “resolution 16/18” was first passed by the U.N. Human Rights Council in April 2011 and by the U.N. General Assembly eight months later. The Obama administration sponsored it together with OIC member Egypt, and the Hillary Clinton State Department championed it as a triumph of diplomacy.

Clinton characterized it as such because the anti-religious intolerance resolution took a different approach after more than a decade of annual OIC-introduced – and Western-opposed – texts aimed at outlawing the “defamation of religion.”

Unlike those earlier measures, [**resolution 16/18**](http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4db960f92.pdf) for the first time did not include the polarizing “defamation” term, and it also affirmed “the right to freedom of opinion and expression.”

But it also expressed deep concern about “derogatory stereotyping, negative profiling and stigmatization of persons based on their religion or belief,” and the creation of “negative stereotypes about religious groups.”

And resolution 16/18 called on governments to adopt “measures to criminalize incitement to imminent violence based on religion or belief,” sparking debate about how different parties would define “incitement.”

In the U.S., [**critics said**](http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203687504577005972874755662?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052970203687504577005972874755662.html) the administration was [**advancing the OIC’s anti-free speech agenda**](http://jonathanturley.org/2009/10/19/just-say-no-to-blasphemy-u-s-supports-eygpt-in-limiting-anti-religious-speech/).

From the outset the Islamic bloc made it clear that, from its perspective, resolution 16/18 [**had the same goals**](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/religious-tolerance-resolution-backed-obama-administration-aligns-islamic-bloc-s) as the earlier “defamation” resolutions.

When a first meeting to discuss implementation of the resolution was held, in Istanbul in July 2011, Pakistan’s U.N. ambassador warned that the OIC would not compromise on three things – anything said or done against the Qur’an, anything said or done against Mohammed, and discrimination against the Muslim community. Influential OIC member Pakistan boasts one of the world’s most controversial blasphemy laws.

After the fanfare accompanying resolution 16/18’s adoption in 2011, differences soon emerged between largely Western democracies, which tended to emphasize the free speech aspect of the text, and OIC member-states, which focused on the limitations.

On Monday the OIC’s New York-based ambassador to the U.N., Turkish diplomat Ofik Gokcen, said on his Twitter feed that the Charlie Hebdo attack and reaction to it underlined the critical importance of “renewed commitment to resolution 16/18.”

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu also alluded to the issue, saying that the two main issues Europe had to deal with were terrorism and “Islamophobia,” which he said directly influence each other. Freedom of belief also required respect, he added.

Last week’s terror attack at the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, which left 12 people dead, drew attention to the satirical magazine’s critical portrayals of Islam since it first reproduced the provocative Danish Mohammed cartoons in 2006.

The OIC has long argued that what it considers blasphemous or “Islamophobic” portrayals of Islam or Islamic personalities constitutes incitement to violence. It [**strongly criticized *Charlie Hebdo***](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/islamic-bloc-slammed-french-magazine-poking-fun-islam-condemns), among others, for publishing such material.

In a *USA Today* [**op-ed**](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/01/11/defending-islam-free-speech-muslim-oic-un-hate-speech-criticism-column/21609273/) on Monday, University of Tennessee associate professor of law Robert Blitt wrote that organizations like the OIC “must bear responsibility for nurturing an environment that breeds violence in the name of defending Islam.”

“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,” said Blitt, a former international law specialist with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

“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,” he said.

“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.”