

Testimony of Sayyid M. Syeed

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Distinguished Leader,

Greetings of Peace, and in Arabic Assalamu Alaykum

Thank you for inviting me to this hearing, a valuable opportunity to present my understanding, experience and vision about the role of Islam in promoting peaceful societies and our ability to counter the violent extremism not only in Muslim societies, among Muslims, but for people of all faiths and no faith.

This past October marked the 19th anniversary of the landmark International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which upholds religious freedom as a core American value and a universal human right. The law calls for the U.S. government to stand “for liberty and with the persecuted, to use and implement appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus...to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples.”

This institutional landmark Act is very important not just for us as Americans but for us as humanity. Nearly two decades after the law’s passage, freedom of religion or belief is unfortunately an unrealized ideal in too many parts of the world. The essence of Islam can be summarized as those who protect and promote religious freedom. I will elaborate this further in my speech as I give you a brief background of myself and American Muslims.

I have provided leadership at various levels in the emergence of Muslim community in America, in building Islamic centers and communities from city to city, state to state . I have led to the formation of the largest and the oldest Islamic organization, Islamic Society of North American better known as ISNA, where I served as its Secretary General (National Executive Director) at its headquarters in Indianapolis and later established an office for this organization on the Capitol Hill for interfaith dialogue and partnership building and outreach to various government branches at the federal level. The organization under ISNA was formally known as Muslim Students Association, under my Presidency of MSA in the 70s I transformed the Organization to

take the next step from being a student based organization to a communal based national organization.

Muslim community is as diverse as America itself, as human kind itself. We have members from all colors, all ethnicities and all different schools of thought. Our success to bring them together and build institutions in large numbers, several thousand Islamic centers, several hundred full time Islamic schools and hundreds of Sunday schools is a historical achievement by itself. The evolution of this community over half a century has strengthened my vision and of my colleagues in democratic and pluralist institutions as most congenial for Islam as a faith and for Muslims believing in a peaceful message of Islam.

Our vision of Islam was developed from the historical vision of the Prophet of Islam when he migrated from his home town Mecca to Madinah where he recognized and respected the diversity of the population in terms of their faiths and tribes. In his home town, he was dealing with one tribe, the Quraish, his own kith and kin, who persecuted him and his followers and did not allow him to teach and preach his religion. In contrast he chose to move to a city where he invited representatives of different tribes, Aws, Khazraj, immigrants from Mecca, and several different Jewish tribes and jointly with all of them drafted a constitution of Madina state where all the participating entities were given freedom to practice their religions and collectively be responsible for the welfare, safety, security of the new state.

This Madina Constitution has served as a reminder for us as a forerunner for the United States 'constitution giving us individual rights and freedom of religion. While developing our Muslim community we had to educate our members that the only way we could develop our congregations and communities was to incorporate our organizations and adopt constitutions. This helped our members to become religiously conscious of the rights and duties, rules and regulations that governed our Islamic Centers, our umbrella organization with which these centers were affiliated.

This provided a rich experience in mutual respect, power sharing, membership of men and women in administering our institutions. Eventually, we have by now, Muslim women not only serving on the board of Islamic organizations but heading national Islamic institutions.

The Madina model of the Prophet after his passing away, and after the 4 rightly guided Caliphs became irrelevant because of the dynastic rule of monarchy for all the subsequent centuries. Today Muslim countries that are independent and are members of OIC because they are Muslim majority countries, are ruled by either monarchs or dictators. American Muslim community is the only Muslim community in the world that has lived in a democracy with a constitutional commitment to freedom of religion, highlighting the essence of Islam and promotion of Human Rights.

There have been times when hatred against Islam has resulted in dangerous acts of violence and intolerance. But it is in those moments of challenge we have experienced the highest level of support from other faith groups denouncing hate against Muslims in the name of religion.

When the pastor in Florida threatened to burn the Quran as a means of intensifying hate against Muslims and Islam, the major religious organizations in America, National Council of Churches, Catholic Conference of Bishops, Union of Reform Judaism, American Baptist Churches and others came forward to denounce the Pastor's hateful rhetoric and expressed their support to me and to my organization. They came to a major press conference on September 7, 2010 at the National Press Building to make a powerful statements against anti Muslim sentiment. They also established a campaign called **Shoulder to Shoulder Standing with American Muslims Against Anti Muslim Sentiment, Upholding American Values**. This campaign is steered and funded by more than 30 Christian and Jewish, national and regional organizations working hard to keep our country free from hate against Muslims.

The Quranic verse (2: 256) “ There is no Compulsion in Religion” has been our guiding light. We have people coming into Islam and going out of Islam. We are proud to say th at we have a large number of leaders of the American Muslims who were not born Muslims. We are aware of Muslims who have of their free will chosen to give up their religion. We find nothing in the Quran or in the example of the Prophet that would have commanded us not to allow such a free will to be treated with respect to the choice of religion or no religion. I know of examples where someone came and embraced Islam and in time relapsed back . Our scholars have convened conferences and discussions and found nothing in the Quran or in the practice of the Prophet against freedom of religion.

It has been painful at times for us to see some hatemongers producing cartoons and false allegations against our Prophet. While it is our duty to promote a better understanding about our Prophet’s life and contributions, we cannot fight hate with hate. Again, we find in the life of the Prophet instances where he was directly insulted but he prayed for the misguided for peace and guidance. However, we should not allow extremists to take actions in the name of Islam as a means of retaliation.

We have built robust partnerships with people of other faiths and celebrated theological developments that we appreciate as Muslims. The Nostra Aetate from the Second Vatican, opened the doors for Catholics to remove the stigma against Jews as the ones responsible for the crucifixion, and welcoming Abrahamic roots of Judaism and Islam. We celebrated the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate in 2015 with US Conference of Catholic Bishops as a welcome reform within Christianity. We celebrated the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther's desire to understand Islam and commission the translation of the Quran for the first time.

We have worked with various denominations of Judaism to have a better understanding between Jewish and Muslim communities under our joint project called Children of Abraham. Several books have been published to enhance the understanding and solidarity between the two communities. In 2016 with partnership of American Jewish Committee and several

prominent Jewish and Muslim leaders here in the US, we launched the Muslim Jewish Advisory Council which focusses on the rise of Hate Crimes.

These achievements in the understanding of our own faith in a pluralist society have tremendous implications for the Muslim world. The books, electronic materials are of utmost importance for giving hope and confidence to our new generations around the globe.

In 2015 we took the step to take the values we as American Muslims cherish to our International counterparts, with the help of King Mohammed the Sixth of Morocco we were able to bring the leaders of OIC and leaders of Muslim Majority Communities together and recreate a Madinah Charter like statement which came to be known as Marrakesh Declaration. The leaders of these countries and institutions proclaimed the protection and promotion of minority religions in their home countries.

Our American Constitution provides us the opportunity for life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, the three key elements of human rights. American Muslims have thrived due to the liberties that every American citizen in our great country can enjoy. Now is a time when we need to work together as Americans. The best of America is represented as “love thy neighbor”, and as neighbors, I am always heartened to see organizations like Islamic Relief working directly with government and interfaith organizations alike to solve problems and bring relief. The work of LDS Charities, United Methodist Church, Catholic Relief Services and many more in partnership with Islamic Relief USA – rebuilds our nation’s communities and gives hope. When we work together, across all faiths, America is stronger. Organizations like Guidance Residential which provides American Muslims the opportunity to be compliant in their faith and not have interest in home purchase also allow those of not Islamic faith or of no faith to also purchase homes at no interest.

American Muslims flourish when America flourishes and America excels when all of its citizens excel. For us to make America great we have to reach out to all Americans of all faiths, all ethnicities, all backgrounds with respect and dignity opening up opportunities and prosperity for all.

I thank you for your time and the opportunity to be here with you today.

Peace be with you.

Sayyid M. Syeed