



CCMW

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Canadian Council of Muslim Women
Conseil canadien des femmes musulmanes

Mr. Mario Silva, MP
Chair, Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism
Room 440-C, Centre Block
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0A6 26th August 2009

Dear Mr. Silva,

Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) is a national non-profit organization of believing women, committed to the equality, equity and empowerment of Canadian Muslim women. We promote Muslim women's identity within the Canadian context and believe that we must be part of, and make a contribution to, our society. Our Guiding principles are based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and on Islamic principles of social justice, compassion and equality of all

CCMW carries out a number of activities including awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building. We have conducted and published research on a variety of issues of importance to immigrants and minorities, and are often contacted by national and international media, interested individuals and organizations, for our views on issues pertaining to Islam and Muslim women.

One such issue, of direct relevance to the inquiry at hand, was the United Nations Resolution on 'Combating Defamation of Religions'. The Resolution made specific mention of Islam and urged the creation of laws in member states to prevent criticism of the religion. CCMW joined partner organizations to advocate against this, since we felt it may be used to restrict freedom of speech and to silence human rights defenders, religious minorities, and other independent voices. Moreover, we believe that reform and revitalization of religious communities depends to a large extent on constructive criticism and free and open dialogue. This does not imply in anyway that

CCMW supports activities or views that are derogatory/defamatory towards any religious community.

In a similar spirit, we would like to express our concerns regarding the inquiry being conducted by the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition for Combating Antisemitism. As an organization of believing Muslim women we strongly condemn malignant acts/comments and discrimination against individuals because of their faith. And in Canada, under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we have existing mechanisms to protect individuals from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and religion. To have extra safeguards for members of only one specific community is unfair, and it would open the floodgates to other religious groups asking for similar protection. We also believe any extra safeguards can potentially curtail freedom of speech, which too is guaranteed by the Charter.

We would also like to express our trepidation regarding the scope of the inquiry and what the Coalition seems to view as 'Antisemitic'. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica the term Semite includes "Arabs, Akkadians, Canaanites, some Ethiopians, and Aramaean tribes including Hebrews." However, it appears the scope of the inquiry is restricted to studying discrimination against only members of the Jewish faith. Furthermore, it is our understanding that the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition for Combating Antisemitism and the inquiry being conducted, its mandate and terms are the result of the London Declaration on Combating Antisemitism, February 2009. According to this document, any criticism of the State of Israel is seen as Antisemitic. Many would argue that this suppresses criticism of the State of Israel not motivated by racism, but based on Human Rights and International Law. We believe silencing such a dialogue is an injustice and an infringement on academic freedom, freedom of speech, association, thought and belief.

It is important to note that many organizations and individuals within Canada, and also international human rights groups including those within Israel, have concerns regarding Israel's human rights record. Interpreting criticism of the State of Israel as Antisemitic would be at par with interpreting criticism of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan etc., as a criticism of Islam!

To conclude, we urge you to keep in mind the following while conducting the inquiry: 1) In Canada we have existing mechanisms which protect all Canadians from discrimination based on race, ethnicity and religion. 2) Setting up extra safeguards to protect members of one specific

faith from discrimination, is in itself discriminatory, and could lead to lawsuits from other communities demanding similar protection. This no doubt would involve tax payers money, which we believe would be better spent elsewhere. 3) We are concerned that equating criticism of Israel with anti-Jewish sentiments silences human rights defenders, religious minorities and alternative voices.

We would like to end by saying that CCMW has written this letter not as an organization whose membership is primarily Muslim. But rather as an organization whose members are proud to be Canadian and all that it entails. This includes protection from discrimination regardless of race, ethnicity and religion, equality for all and freedom of speech, thought and belief.

Thank you for your time

Razia Jaffer

President, National Board CCMW