

Clinton hosts summit on religious intolerance

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrapped up a summit of international leaders this week to explore specific steps to combat intolerance, discrimination and violence on the basis of religion or belief.

The closed-door meeting on Wednesday (Dec. 14) was the first of an ongoing series called "The Istanbul Process." Representatives came from 30 countries and international organizations, including Egypt, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

"We are working together to protect two fundamental freedoms -- the right to practice one's religion freely, and the right to express one's opinion without fear," Clinton said in her closing remarks.

The goal of the Istanbul Process is to produce a list of best practices for preventing religious discrimination and violence. Ambassador Michael Kozak, a deputy assistant secretary of state, acknowledged that the list would be helpful primarily for countries that already have the political will to protect religious freedom but need practical guidance to do so.

Nevertheless, Kozak said, it could also put pressure on repressive regimes to loosen up.

"By itself, this isn't going to change their minds. But ... the more countries you get starting to do things in a good way, the more isolated the others become, and then movements develop in their own countries," Kozak said.

The Istanbul Process grew out of a resolution adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council in March and then by the U.N. General Assembly in November.

Resolutions in the previous 10 years had supported legal measures restricting the "defamation of religions." The more recent Resolution 16/18, however, broke with that tradition by calling for concrete, positive measures to combat religious intolerance rather than legal measures that restrict speech.

"It is important that we recognize what we accomplished when this resolution ended 10 years of divisive debate where people were not listening to each other anymore. Now we are. We're talking," said Clinton.

The new resolution has faced criticism from conservatives who think it amounts to a concession to Islamic countries, and will result in the curtailing of any speech that is critical of Islam.

After Clinton's speech, Andrea Lafferty, president of the Traditional Values Coalition, said her organization has been denied entrance to conferences and hotels for fear of "incitement to violence," a phrase used in Resolution 16/18.

"We remain concerned about the use of that language," Lafferty said.

Kozak tried to dispel her fears.

"That whole issue of incitement got debated a lot, and we were clear all along that what we meant by incitement was when ... the speech is part of an act," he said.

"It's a very narrow concept."