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The right to change one's religion or belief is guaranteed in Article 18 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Despite international recognition of the fundamental right for each individual to live according to their own conscience and belief, countless people around the world face direct opposition to exercise this right. This is particularly true for ex-Muslims, as mainstream interpretations of Islam forbids leaving the religion (apostasy) and demands severe punishments for those who question its validity, espouse ideas that contradict it, or are perceived as harming the image of Islamic teachings (blasphemy). Many of the most egregious violations of human rights, including prosecutions for blasphemy and apostasy occur in Muslim-majority countries or communities. For this reason, Ex-Muslims of North America (EXMNA) advocates for acceptance of religious dissent, promotes secular values, and aims to reduce discrimination faced by those who leave Islam.

As ex-Muslims are in a uniquely dangerous position, we are able to provide essential insight into how hatred based on religion or belief and lack thereof is engendered against us. As the first organization of its kind, EXMNA has cultivated deep knowledge from serving ex-Muslims worldwide who face imprisonment, exile or execution simply for renouncing their faith. Based on a number of vital programs and initiatives EXMNA has implemented to highlight this issue, the organization is also well positioned to share successful transformative responses to the advocacy of hatred.

Advocacy of hatred against ex-Muslims is defined in legal and policy frameworks in several ways as 33 Muslim and Muslim-majority countries worldwide criminalize the act of leaving or criticizing Islam. The origins of these laws stem from various religious texts such as the Qur'an which expressly condemns acts of apostasy and blasphemy and the Hadith which proscribes their punishment. The wide variance in punishment for blasphemy and apostasy, from fines to execution, is due to conflicting doctrine. The Qur'an does not prescribe a specific punishment for apostasy but rather states that apostates will face Allah's wrath. However, the Hadith cites the Prophet Muhammad's call for the execution of apostates. The definition of blasphemy and its penalties also vary depending on which of the five main Islamic schools of jurisprudence one adheres.

While many believe that apostasy and blasphemy laws are singularly Islamic, in some instances [codification originated](#) with European colonial powers who utilized them in an effort to minimize sectarian conflict. In fact, the very justification used by Muslim-majority countries to prosecute blasphemy and apostasy today mirrors how colonial powers utilized these laws in the past; to protect against "inciting religious hatred" or "hurting religious sentiments".

In Muslim-majority countries, the likelihood of severe consequences for those who leave Islam is significantly higher due not only to legislation forbidding or severely punishing apostasy or blasphemy but prejudicial attitudes in society that also perpetuate hatred of ex-Muslims. Even if an individual is accused of apostasy or blasphemy but is not initially punished by the state for their transgression, a religious cleric or similarly authoritative body from anywhere in the world can issue religious edicts

against the accused. This often includes the offer of rewards for those willing to murder blasphemers or apostates in the name of Islam. Thus, the accused are often forced into hiding, exiled, or seek asylum in other countries due to intense political and social pressure from radical extremists. Even prior to an official investigation or trial, the mere accusation of blasphemy or apostasy is sufficient to result in individual or mob violence against the accused resulting in injury or death.

One of EXMNA's key tools is the [Persecution Tracker](#) which independently monitors and tracks instances of state-sponsored religious persecution. The tracker catalogs and monitors cases of persecution and oppression against those who commit the "crime" of speaking their minds and blaspheming Islam in secular and theocratic countries alike. It includes cases as well as the details of judicial or extrajudicial punishments and the database can be searched by country or individual case. A submission form is also available for those who want to report new cases from around the world. EXMNA's Persecution Tracker has been recognized and used by the State Department and USCIRF as reference material for reports on international religious freedom violations as well as a resource for US embassies worldwide to monitor targets of blasphemy and apostasy charges.

Many of the recent cases EXMNA tracks via the Persecution Tracker involve individuals who have been charged under censorship laws that are used indiscriminately to silence religious, political, and social dissent with the pretext of preventing "blasphemy" or "maintaining social order." Information sharing via social media apps and private messages shared on services such as Telegram and WhatsApp are used to circumvent orthodoxy and have become essential to the free exchange of ideas. However, these tools are also easily weaponized in the advocacy of hatred by erasing ex-Muslim viewpoints from social media. A tool to facilitate the free flow of ideas, social media content is routinely subject to regime-imposed blocks in Muslim-majority countries, often with the cooperation of corporations. For instance, community standards recently implemented by Facebook state that content attacking "ideas" and "concepts" can be subject to removal under certain circumstances. Social media companies enforce their guidelines in problematic and inconsistent ways which results in a chilling effect on acts of freedom of expression. Additionally, special laws enacted in Muslim-majority countries in the last decade have singled out online speech for prosecution—often under the false pretense of controlling misinformation and hate speech and sometimes more explicitly stating the aim to curb political and religious dissent. EXMNA recommends that social media and communications companies urgently develop safeguards and policies to prevent state actors from utilizing social media technology to bring criminal charges against users for sharing their beliefs.

While apostates can be put to death in several Muslim-majority countries, ex-Muslims frequently face social death in the West with many ex-Muslims reporting negative repercussions after their apostasy. In addition to experiencing losing familial and community support, ex-Muslims in the West report high instances of verbal and physical abuse, emotional manipulation, and loss of financial support. To better understand and document these experiences, EXMNA surveyed hundreds of American and Canadian ex-Muslims and developed the [Apostate Report](#), offering a glimpse into the experiences and beliefs of apostates in the West—from misogyny to science-based objections to religious belief. EXMNA also created a mini-documentary series, [Life Beyond Faith](#), which provides first-hand ex-Muslim testimony with the aim to break down the negative stereotypes and advocacy of hatred towards ex-Muslims. The series shares stories like that of Jamal—an ex-Muslim, who as a teenager was abandoned by his family for leaving the faith; or of Mahad, kidnapped from the US and taken to a "conversion camp" in Somalia.

Recognizing a critical gap in the unique support needs of ex-Muslims, EXMNA provides Emergency Assistance by offering short-term shelter, transportation, and coordination support to ex-Muslims throughout North America. Through these series of programs, EXMNA works to garner empathy for and

bring light to the ex-Muslim experience and lead the development of effective policies and programs that enable the freedom of religion, conscience, or belief.

EXMNA has placed significant emphasis on holding nations accountable for violations of religious freedom and advocating for the release of individuals who have been unjustly imprisoned under blasphemy and apostasy laws. This has been achieved by supporting the United Nations 3<sup>rd</sup> Committee's adoption of [new language](#) to protect individuals targeted under anti-apostasy and anti-blasphemy laws. This includes in both the extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions resolution and the moratorium on the death penalty resolution.

EXMNA is also actively engaged with members of Congress and the U.S. Department of State to raise awareness about the crucial need to safeguard freedom of religion or belief and nonbelief. Over the course of several Congressional sessions, EXMNA has supported and contributed language to the [The Blasphemy Resolution](#) which calls for the President of the United States to hold nations accountable for blasphemy and apostasy and to make the repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws a priority in bilateral relationships between the United States and countries that have such laws. The resolution also calls on the governments of countries that enforce such laws to amend or repeal them and to release anyone imprisoned pursuant to them.

Other specific US-based advocacy efforts include the support, advocacy and lobbying for:

- [H.Res.82](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024) Expressing the sense of Congress regarding the need to designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, the need to appoint a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, and for other purposes.
- [S.Con.Res.3](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024) A concurrent resolution affirming the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental human right that is essential to a free society and protected for all people of the United States under the Constitution of the United States, and recognizing the 237th anniversary of the enactment of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.
- [H.Res.542](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024) Condemning human rights violations and violations of international religious freedom in India, including those targeting Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, Adivasis, and other religious and cultural minorities.
- [H.Res.492](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024) Condemning the Government of Iran's state-sponsored persecution of the Baha'i minority and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights.
- [H.R.2766](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024)
- [H.Res.701](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024) Encouraging further deepening and broadening of the Abraham Accords on occasion of the third anniversary of their signing to continue building bridges towards a lasting peace.
- [S.Con.Res.2](#) — 118th Congress (2023-2024) A concurrent resolution commending the bravery, courage, and resolve of the women and men of Iran demonstrating in more than 133 cities and risking their safety to speak out against the Iranian regime's human rights abuses.
- [S.3895](#) — 117th Congress (2021-2022) United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2022

In addition to its tireless advocacy efforts, EXMNA has been actively involved in raising awareness about the fundamental importance of freedom of thought and conscience. Through educational campaigns, public events, and strategic partnerships with other organizations, EXMNA strives to foster a society that deeply respects and values the rights of all individuals, irrespective of their religious or nonreligious

beliefs. As the Biden Administration continues to prioritize international religious freedom, EXMNA remains steadfast in its commitment to supporting these efforts and actively contributing towards a world where individuals can freely express their beliefs without the looming threat of persecution or discrimination. By collaborating with like-minded organizations and engaging with policymakers, EXMNA is determined to make a tangible and lasting impact in the ongoing fight for religious freedom and the rights of nonbelievers. EXMNA would also like to emphasize the critical importance of Special Rapporteur Ghanea's continued monitoring of the 12 countries that allow the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy charges and utilize all available UN communications and mechanisms to pressure for their repeal.