**Statement of Board of Directors**

**American Psychological Association**

**December 10, 2015**

Since the founding of our nation, religious liberty has been at the heart of the American vision of democratic freedom. Within the framework of the U.S. Constitution, the right to practice one’s religion is recognized and upheld. Moreover, due to the mandated separation of church and state, religion cannot be enforced or controlled by the U.S. government.

Recent acts of terror and violence perpetrated by extremists using the name of religion have shaken our world and our sense of security. At times throughout history, religious extremism -- in the form of factions of religious groups that misuse their faith to support violence in the name of their religion -- has been faced by all of the world’s major religions and has led to massive chaos and suffering.

During the past decade, violent extremists claiming to act in the name of Islam have raised fears and created confusion about Islam and the teachings of the Qur’an. In the United States, some individuals and groups have attempted to conflate all of Islam with extremist violence by disseminating misinformation and distortions about Islam and American Muslims. This has led to a rise of individual and systemic discrimination against American Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims often with heritage from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. This oppression can be seen in enactment of discriminatory policies, and most recently, the refusal of many countries’ governments in Europe and some federal and state officials in the United States to accept Syrian refugees who are seeking safe harbor (see <http://interfaithalliance.org/americanmuslimfaq>).

In particular, American psychologists are challenged to acknowledge the impact of the post-9/11 climate of fear, bias and discrimination facing our Muslim colleagues, students, clients and communities. We have witnessed hate crimes and other acts of violence perpetrated against Muslims and those mistakenly identified as Muslim (e.g., Sikhs). In line with our long tradition of bringing psychological science and expertise to bear on prejudice, bias and discrimination, it is time to support our Muslim colleagues, counter misinformation and sweeping generalizations ([Diversity of Muslims in the U. S.](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr159.pdf)), and address fear by supporting resilience and nurturing connection and community.

Psychology, which comprises our knowledge of human behavior and our commitment to benefit society and improve people’s lives, can offer several constructive responses to violent extremism and the fear of more violence.

First, we understand [trauma response](http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/index.aspx). Second, we know how to foster individual and community resilience ([APA, 2011](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx); Kilmer et al, 2010). Third, we understand how fear can split communities, distort perceptions, confound decision making and increase bias and discrimination (Fischhoff, 2011). Fourth, we have a wealth of multicultural scholars who can contribute to the discourse on religious and cultural identities and practices to promote understanding and acceptance. The American Psychological Association (APA) has taken a leadership role in opposing discrimination based on, or derived from, religion or spirituality and in encouraging commensurate consideration of religion and spirituality as diversity variables, as delineated in the [association’s policy adopted in 2007](http://www.apa.org/about/policy/religious-discrimination.pdf).

[APA’s vision statement](http://www.apa.org/about/apa/strategic-plan/default.aspx) sets forth the association’s commitment to global partnerships that promote the application of “psychological knowledge and methods to facilitate the resolution of personal, societal and global challenges in diverse, multicultural and international contexts.” We understand the adverse, and often tragic, impact of stereotyping, implicit bias and prejudice. We know that marginalized communities who are perceived as potentially violent or dangerous actually endure the most violence from within not without. We offer support and assistance to individuals and communities who are suffering. We must empathize, sympathize and offer solutions to counter fear-based decisions and actions among our communities, and advocate for those who are marginalized and experiencing oppression.

To quote Martin Luther King, Jr.,”***Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere*.”**

References

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