

OSCE

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Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

**Freedom of Religion or Belief: Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of
Combating Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians,
Muslims and Members of Other Religions**

22-23 June 2017

Hofburg, Vienna

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In less than three months, the UK became a target of four major terror attacks.

On 22 March 2017, an attack at Westminster has claimed five lives. Over 50 people were injured.

On 22 May 2017, 23 people, including children, were killed and over 200 were injured when a suicide bomber detonated an explosive at a concert hall in Manchester.

On 3 June 2017, eight people were killed, and around 50 were injured when three attackers drove a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and then continued the deadly attack stabbing people nearby the Borough Market.

On 19 June 2017, one person was killed and 11 injured when a van drove into pedestrians outside of the Finsbury Park mosque.

The mentioned terror attacks do not include some terror plots that the British police stopped before the terrorist spilt the blood of innocent people. The increase in the terror attacks in the UK (and also across Europe) suggests that more needs to be done to address the issue of terrorism and violent extremism linked to terrorism.

Changes are needed to ensure that people in Britain and the whole of Europe are safe and that such acts of terrorism never happen again. However, at the same time, states must ensure that human rights are preserved and guaranteed to all.

The first rights that governments target whenever such terror attacks occur are freedom of religion or belief and associated rights, for example, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association. The very rights that come under pressure due to any security measures, namely, freedom of religion including exercising the right in public, freedom of speech including the right to express opinions that others may not agree with, are the very foundation of a democratic society. Hence, states must protect these rights. It also means that religious groups must not be targeted only because of belonging to the groups.

Unfortunately, the strategy in the UK does the opposite.

In October 2015, the Government released its “Counter-Extremism Strategy” aimed at addressing the issue of extremism, rather than focusing on terrorism and violent extremism. The definition of extremism as proposed in the strategy is vague inviting indefinite interpretation and hence highly problematic, specifically, they invoke the so-called British values. As British values include the commitment to equality and tolerance, this is often erroneously interpreted as accommodating an obligation to promote equality at the price of religious freedom and living by religious values. Consequently, such an approach targets religious communities. Ultimately, the strategy targets the unpopular but non-violent views and opinions and so may censor speech.

The new approach introduced in the Counter-Extremism Strategy mainstreams the use of the terms to merge non-violent extremism, violent extremism and terrorism into the generic extremism and so to downplay the atrocities committed by terrorist and violent extremists. At the same time, it aims to criminalise unpopular ideas or views. By doing so, the strategy stigmatises and alienates people, most specifically, religious communities.

Furthermore, it is discriminatory as it neglects the very foundation of a democratic society, namely, that individuals may have conflicting views and opinion without these views and opinions being contrary to British values. In fact, tolerance of diverse views and opinions are the kernel of British values. The broad approach needlessly threatens long hold freedoms that should be celebrated.

Such an approach relying on the very vague definition of extremism means that more people will be investigated or under surveillance. Such a broad approach diverts resources away from the real problem and will likely have an adverse effect on the efficiency of dealing with cases – as there are no capacity and resources for such a broad approach. Ultimately, the police will be responding to claims and complaints of the very vaguely defined non-violent extremism rather than focusing on terrorism and violent extremism.

The vague language of the UK strategy aims to allow the government flexibility to act as the government chooses to. However, this flexibility means that rights will be limited. New approaches to countering terrorism and violent extremism are needed. Such a new approach should be in narrowing the enquiry rather than broadening, and ensuring that any such enquiry is followed up. Ultimately, people in the UK will not benefit from a database of broadly defined non-violent ‘extremists’ who do not pose any danger to the society. People in the UK need a database of terrorists, violent extremists, and complicitous actors- and most importantly- a follow-up procedure to ensure that the individuals who may have been involved or are likely to participate in terror attacks are not lost in the system. Lastly, people in the UK need a guarantee that the state will protect and ensure their human rights. This includes the right to freedom of religion or belief of all.

Thank you.