



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 14

Fundamental Freedoms II, including: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief

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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, October 1, 2014

History shows that nations that uphold the rights of their people -- including the freedom of religion -- are ultimately more just and more peaceful and more successful. Nations that do not uphold these rights sow the bitter seeds of instability and violence and extremism.

These words of President Obama, used at the National Prayer Breakfast this February, underscore the importance of religious freedom. As signatories of the Helsinki Final Act, we have a special obligation to uphold this freedom. My delegation wishes to thank the OSCE's Three Tolerance Representatives: Alexey Avtonomov, Personal Representative on Combatting Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions; Professor Talip Kucukcan, Personal Representative on Combatting Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims; and Rabbi Andrew Baker, Personal Representative on Combatting Anti-Semitism, for their dedicated efforts to defend the right of all individuals in the OSCE region to exercise their fundamental freedom of religion or belief.

Yet, there continue to be many serious challenges to religious freedom in the OSCE region. We are concerned about increasing legal restrictions on peaceful religious practice, including Islam, in Central Asian countries. The United States has since 2006 designated **Uzbekistan** a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom violations. We also designated **Turkmenistan** for the first time in 2014. Both countries continue to imprison people for their religious beliefs, and authorities continue raids on religious organizations, arrests of religious leaders, and restrictions on religious literature. **Turkmenistan** has introduced new laws imposing fines for some religious practices and banning the outside funding of religious groups. NGOs estimate **Uzbekistan** is holding approximately 10,000 to 12,000 people in prison on vague charges of "religious extremism." There continue to be reports that such prisoners face torture and other harsh treatment. Anti-terrorism police have raided the homes of Baptists and worshipers of other faiths and jailed and fined worshipers.

In **Tajikistan**, laws prohibit anyone under 18 from participating in public religious activities and effectively bar women from praying in mosques. New laws also require all religious materials to comply with the requirements set out by the State Committee on Religious Affairs. Additionally, efforts to increase government control over the practice of Islam have intensified. Authorities prohibit female Muslim students in schools and universities from wearing headscarves, and only one madrassah now remains open in the entire country. Islamic sermon topics are being decided by the State, and imams are required to wear state-specified uniforms. Similarly, laws in **Kazakhstan** penalize some religious activities, with penalties ranging from the closing of independent mosques to imprisonment, fines, and deportation.

We are extremely concerned by the use of restrictive laws on religion and extremism to target those belonging to some religions. In **Russia**, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim followers of Nursi, and others have been imprisoned, had their homes raided, and their religious materials confiscated. In the past few months, Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical churches have been liquidated or faced the threat of closure.

In Russia-occupied **Crimea**, we are concerned by mounting pressure on the Muslim Tatar community, which has been subjected to attacks on mosques, raids of madrassahs under the cover of so-called "extremism" laws, and prosecutions and fines. We also note with concern pressure against members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, **Ukrainian Greek Catholics, Jews, and other religious minorities in Crimea.**

Moderator, laws that require the registration of religions often have the effect of restricting basic rights. Registration requirements may have the effect of creating distinctions between favored religions and disfavored ones; registered religions often receive a range of benefits, including tax privileges, greater access to state institutions, and teaching opportunities, while other faiths are denied these benefits.

In **Hungary**, the Parliament is empowered with extraordinary and, for all practical purposes, unchecked power to decide what is and what is not a church, exacerbating the discriminatory potential of a two-tier system among those that are registered and those that are not. My delegation regrets that ten religious groups had their applications denied again this summer by Parliament's Judiciary Committee. The final vote on these ten is still pending.

In **Turkey**, nearly 20 percent of the population claim to be Alevis, although the government refuses to recognize officially their houses of worship. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate continues to face restrictions on the religious freedom of its adherents.

We are also concerned that restrictions or bans in many participating States on the use of head coverings and other religious attire unduly restrict freedom of religion and have served to stigmatize women, in particular, who wear them.

We are concerned about recent anti-Semitic violence, ranging from attacks on synagogues in **France** to physical attacks on Jews in **Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands**. Such violence constrains the freedoms of religious worship and expression. We remind participating States of the OSCE Berlin Declaration pledge "to strive to ensure that their legal systems foster a safe environment free from anti-Semitic harassment, violence, or discrimination in all fields of life."

We welcome **Norway's** passage of a law protecting circumcision when performed under medical supervision. Even so, we remain concerned that efforts to ban religious practices, including ritual animal slaughter and male circumcision, could have the effect of "legislating" religious minorities out of the OSCE region.

We welcome **Armenia's** development of alternative service options in lieu of military service and the release last year of all Jehovah's Witnesses serving sentences for refusing on religious grounds to perform military service. We hope this serves as an example for other participating States.

In closing, we urge law enforcement in all participating States to respond promptly to hate crimes targeting religious and other communities.