

**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
1 October**

**UK Statement for Working Session 10
Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief**

The United Kingdom fully subscribes to the statement delivered by the Netherlands on behalf of the European Union, which sets out the importance the EU attaches to this fundamental freedom and the activity it has taken to date to combat discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. Freedom of religion or belief is likewise a priority area for the UK government. We want to work actively together with other OSCE participating States in strengthening this universal human right.

Freedom of religion or belief and respect for religious plurality is at the heart of British society. We believe that the more tolerant a country is towards different religious groups, the more stable and plural it is likely to be. This is because religious freedom is a valuable indicator of wider democratic principles and is often a litmus test of other fundamental freedoms.

The freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief cannot exist in isolation. The freedom to manifest one's thoughts, conscience, religion or belief either alone or in a community cannot exist without freedom of expression. It is the UK's firm belief that the freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief are interdependent, interrelated and mutually reinforcing. These fundamental rights are guaranteed alongside each other in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

If we look at the language in international human rights law then we see first and foremost that freedom of religion or belief is about individuals. The right of the individual to follow the religion or belief of their choice. Protection is not afforded to the belief or concept but to the individual who manifests that religion or belief. Both freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief should be manifested in conformity with public safety, order and the fundamental freedom of others, but restrictions on the manifestation of these freedoms are not limitless and violence in the name of religion or due to perceived insult to a religion can never be justified.

The right of an individual to choose their religion, to change their religion, and to live without religious conviction or activity is absolute. However, the manifestation of that individual right also involves the freedom to worship and to meet with fellow believers. The freedom to follow the central tenets of one's faith and to practice it collectively are equally vital if societies are to claim that they guarantee true freedom of religion. This right is particularly pertinent for

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followers of minority faiths. Across the OSCE region we would like to highlight the importance of fair and non-discriminatory registration procedures for religious communities that choose to obtain a status of legal personality.

We look to the network of States in the OSCE to draw on the abundance of religious and cultural diversity that exists in our region. Individually and collectively we call on all participating States to work with their faith or belief communities to better understand their concerns and ensure they are not discriminated against. Moving beyond that, we want to see faith leaders working together to stand up for the rights of people of other faiths or none. When one faith is under attack, all are under attack.

Institutionally the OSCE is seeking to strengthen its support for this freedom not least in its efforts to reform the Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. We call on all participating States to make use of this resource and to ensure that freedom of religion or belief remains at the core of the OSCE's human rights' agenda.

We also call on the OSCE to encourage faith and belief communities to participate in the HDIM. And we suggest that the OSCE panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief should be used as a resource to facilitate dialogue between religious and belief communities on their mutual experiences of the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief.

We warmly invite fellow participating States and others present to join us at one o'clock in Room 1 for our side event on freedom of religion or belief. We will be looking at how the OSCE and its participating States can work better together to strengthen the right to freedom of religion or belief. We will also think about the strengths and weaknesses to date of the OSCE approach on freedom of religion or belief and discuss how we can best go forward in the future.

Thank you.

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