



Forum 18 <http://www.forum18.org>  
*The right to believe, to worship and witness*  
*The right to change one's belief or religion*  
*The right to join together and express one's belief*

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### *Session 1: Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims*

Ambassador Lenarčič has accurately described freedom of religion or belief as “one of the most central and longstanding of the OSCE human dimension commitments”. This is because genuine security requires a comprehensive framework for peace and stability - including respect for everyone's freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental freedoms. Experience within the OSCE area is that violating any one community's freedom of thought, conscience or belief is linked to violations of everyone else's freedom of religion or belief - whatever their religious or non-religious views may be - as well as violations of other fundamental freedoms, such as of expression and of peaceful assembly.

So it is vital to move “from commitments to implementation” on freedom of religion or belief for all. The worst violators of freedom of religion or belief are participating States. In Uzbekistan, when the harsh 1998 Religion Law was adopted, President Karimov claimed it was to counter so-called “Wahhabi” Muslims and stated that “such people must be shot in the forehead. If necessary, I'll shoot them myself.” As Forum 18 documents, many devout peaceful Muslims continue to be jailed - in 2009 alone at least 47 readers of works by theologian Said Nursi were given prison sentences totalling around 380 years. This is part of systematic attacks on the religious freedom of Muslims and religious minorities such as Christians, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews and Hare Krishna devotees. Forum 18 has found that such repression increases the appeal of extremist groups. As a Muslim scholar argued in a commentary we published, freedom of religion or belief would allow the views of extremist groups claiming Islam as a motivation to be openly debated and their support base to be reduced.

It is not just Uzbekistan which violates its human dimension commitments. Among the too many other participating State violators is Azerbaijan, which has closed some mosques and Christian churches, and barred Muslims from praying outside during Friday prayers. This time last year a package of laws was passed imposing more state controls on all religious communities, including requiring all leaders of Muslim communities to be appointed by the state-favoured Caucasian Muslim Board. In a sadly typical example of denial, the parliamentary deputy who arranged the amendments' passage through Parliament stated that they “do not at all restrict freedom of conscience”. These violations of OSCE commitments add further to the country's sorry record of actions against people exercising freedom of religion or belief, such as Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works and Jehovah's Witnesses being raided and detained, Baptists denied legal status, Georgian Orthodox churches kept closed against the wishes of their people, or those who just want to read religious literature being censored by the state.

Public authorities in some participating States who try to control all religious activity may realise that this encourages extremism. Islamist insurgents from Russia's North Caucasus republic of Dagestan have stepped up their attacks in recent months - conducting major suicide bombings in both Moscow and the republic itself - but Forum 18 has found that local state authorities are beginning to relax their strict control on Muslim public life. “The authorities are beginning to understand that they can't keep raiding everywhere and trying to control things in that way, that constant pressure doesn't make people regard them positively,” local human rights lawyer Ziyautdin Uvaisov told Forum 18.

So recommendations for participating States and the OSCE as a whole could include:

- freedom of religion or belief violations to be seen as not only attacks on particular people or communities, but also as attacks on the fundamental rights and freedoms of all people;
- continue to affirm the dependence of genuine tolerance and non-discrimination on effective protection for fundamental human rights and the rule of law;
- insisting that politically binding human dimension commitments are for implementation by all participating States;
- OSCE institutions and field operations mainstream freedom of religion or belief in human dimension work, taking full advantage of the ODIHR's expertise.

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