



## Statement for Working Session I, HDIM 2017

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**The importance of free expression in the context of anti-extremist actions in central Asia**

As has been reaffirmed by the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, "freedom of expression is a prerequisite to prevent and counter violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism."<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, the right to express oneself freely has too often been pitted *against* security concerns, and fears of terrorism instrumentalised so as to silence those who do not subscribe to the majority view.

There are concerning examples from across the OSCE region; but I should like to highlight some Central Asian states, where specifically, non-verbal expressions of personal belief have been subjected to illegitimate curtailment over the past few years.

There has been a forceful crackdown on sartorial expression of women; in some regions of Tajikistan hijab blacklists have been drawn up, shops selling the garments closed down<sup>2</sup> and the state has ordered and harassed Muslim women to tie head scarves the 'Tajik' way.<sup>3</sup> In Uzbekistan, authorities are removing head scarves from women in de-veilings<sup>4</sup> and reportedly, special units have been formed and tasked with finding and detaining women wearing the hijab.<sup>5</sup> In Kazakhstan, laws have been drafted banning clothing perceived as overtly religious.<sup>6</sup>

There have also been reports of forced beard-shavings; in Tajikistan police have shaved nearly 13,000 men.<sup>7</sup> In Uzbekistan, football fans have reported being prevented from entering the stadium until having removed their beards.<sup>8</sup> In Turkmenistan, reports have suggested that law enforcement officers are confronting men aged under 50 with stubble or beards and accusing them of being Wahhabis.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the discourse and explicit reasoning for these crackdowns is rooted in concerns about Islamic militancy. There is growing unease across the region about rising Islamic radicalism.<sup>10</sup> However, governments have been consistently inflating, overstating, and misstating this threat in order to justify cracking down on political opponents and those who seek to practice their faith more conservatively or openly.

It is unclear how state offices can claim to legitimately attribute specific intentions to those wearing beards and hijabs, when they are grounded in speculation about their symbolic meaning. That beards and headscarves can be sported for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to, religious beliefs, only amplifies the subjectivity and dangers around any attempt to curtail this form of expression.

As the OSCE representative on freedom of the media points out, free expression can play a critical role in promoting equality and combatting intolerance. We urge the governments of the Central Asian states concerned to foster not hinder expression of belief so that an environment of debate, inquiry and tolerance can be fostered. Where such states might be in doubt, we recommend the UN OHCHR Rabat Plan of Action<sup>11</sup> in helping clarify the scope of state obligations on prohibiting incitement to violence, hostility and discrimination whilst maintaining the right to free expression of its citizens.

<sup>1</sup> "Communiqué by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media on free expression and the fight against terrorism", 2 September 2016, <http://www.osce.org/fom/262266>

<sup>2</sup> <http://eurasianet.org/node/80231>, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/what-not-to-wear-in-tajikistan-the-hijab/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-muslim-head-scarves-hijab-satr/28683842.html>

<sup>4</sup> The first "hudjums" dates back to 1927 when the Soviet government forced women to stop wearing scarves, veils, and burqas.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbekistan-deveiling-drive-hijab/27070345.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://eurasianews.info/en/important/kazakhstan-law-on-religious-clothing-in-the-works.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/tajikistan-no-haji-no-hijab-and-shave-your-beard/>,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/tajikistan-shaves-13000-men-beards-radicalism-160120133352747.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rferl.org/content/uzbek-soccer-fans-beards-stadium-banned/27775057.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://habartm.org/archives/5548>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-tajikistan-idUSKBN0OD1AP20150528>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat\\_draft\\_outcome.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf)