

**OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
Freedom of Religion or Belief
Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of Combatting Anti-Semitism
and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Muslims, and Members
of Other Religions
Vienna, 22-23 June 2017**

**Session I: Freedom of religion or belief, non-discrimination and other human
rights and fundamental freedoms as the essential normative basis for peaceful
coexistence and security in the OSCE region**

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At the outset I wish to thank the OSCE Austrian Chairmanship in Office and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for having organized this timely Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM) on Freedom of Religion or Belief, focusing on Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of Combatting Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Muslims, and Members of Other Religions.

I would take the opportunity of this Session to touch upon three points: freedom of religion or belief vis-à-vis the right to live in security, the relationship between freedom of religion or belief and the principle of non-discrimination, the importance of freedom of religion or belief in respect of other fundamental freedoms.

The right to live in security is one of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the OSCE participating States – individually and collectively – bear the primary responsibility for the protection of this right. It is well known that the OSCE was created as, and still is, a security organization, based since its very beginning on a broad concept of security. In the Helsinki Final Act the participating States recognized, among the Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States, “the universal significance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for which is an essential factor for the peace, justice and well-being necessary to ensure the development of friendly relations and co-operation among themselves as among all States”. In this perspective security and human rights look complementary, interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

On the other side, freedom of religion or belief has always been, and still is, at the core of the OSCE’s activities. Ever since it was explicitly mentioned in the VII Principle of the

Helsinki Decalogue, and evidenced by the fact that it has been re-affirmed and detailed in many other subsequent commitments, the protection of religious freedom has continued to occupy a central place in the comprehensive approach of the OSCE to security. This explicit structural link between human rights, and in particular freedom of religion or belief, on the one hand, and security, on the other, represents a unique feature of the OSCE. It heightens awareness of freedom of religion or belief not only as a universal human right to be protected for itself, but also as a fundamental factor for the building and well-being of our democratic and pluralistic societies as well as for the creation of security within and between the participating States.

With regard to the relationship between freedom of religion or belief and the principle of non discrimination, it is worthy to recall the indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of human rights, according to which the commitments on preventing and combating religious intolerance and non-discrimination cannot be considered apart from those longstanding on freedom of religion or belief. Tolerance cannot be an *alibi* for denying or not guaranteeing religious freedom. On the other hand, tolerance and non-discrimination cannot be used or interpreted in a way that could restrict freedom of religion or belief or other fundamental freedoms: freedom cannot be sacrificed on the altar of tolerance.

In certain societies, religions can be perceived, and are perceived, as a source of intolerance rather than of social harmony. They are felt to be a threat to tolerance, peace and security, rather than an enrichment and a contribution to cultural and social development. The situation is dangerous to the extent that by contributing to the creation of a negative attitude towards religions and believers, it will harm the well-being of these persons and communities, as well as of the society as a whole. States have the responsibility for the common good, social peace and coexistence among the nation. Thus they have the duty to guarantee them by respecting the pluralism and protecting the freedom of religion or belief for everyone.

Finally, allow me to underline how freedom of religion or belief is the hallmark of all other human rights, since it concerns the most intimate realm of the spirit. It is a question of respecting the most sensitive area of a person's autonomy, allowing her/him to act in accordance to the dictates of the conscience both in private and public life. This right is so closely bound to the other fundamental freedoms that the rigour with which it is protected indicates the general level of respect of human rights in our societies. Likewise, it will be possible to measure an authentic democracy's willingness to put it into practice by the way a society contributes to giving each religious community the space it is due and to allowing it to live together with the others.