



United States Mission to the OSCE

Working Session 6 Freedom of Religion or Belief

As prepared for delivery by Kari Johnstone, Director of the Office for International Religious Freedom, U.S Department of State
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Thank you, Moderator. Freedom of religion or belief is a universal right that States must uphold and defend. Yet far too many people, in far too many places, live without the protection of this fundamental freedom.

We live in a world where 84 percent of the people claim a religion. We cannot afford to overlook this issue that matters to the overwhelming majority of the world's people. When we protect the belief of one—and this includes the right not to believe as well—we protect the belief of all. Governments and civil society must practice acceptance and respect for diverse beliefs. Governments should take steps to protect and promote religious freedom and combat religious intolerance. Civil society plays a vital role in creating an environment of tolerance where all may freely live in accordance with their faith or belief.

At the Tirana Tolerance Conference in May, the United States urged participating States to fully implement OSCE religious freedom and tolerance commitments. We continue to call for fulfillment of these commitments.

Some participating States, such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, have adopted laws that restrict religious activity or impose burdensome registration requirements. Labeled by some governments as “nontraditional religions,” evangelical Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Falun Gong, and others may be denied official recognition in some participating States, with members sometimes facing harassment or criminal charges for practicing their religion or belief. NGOs estimate that Uzbekistan, which the United States has designated a Country of Particular Concern since 2006, has imprisoned thousands on religion-related charges.

Hungary in 2012 de-registered all religions and then re-registered only a small fraction; it has now allowed the remaining religious groups to re-register but with a significantly lower level of access to state support.

Bans on religious attire in certain spaces remain in place in some countries, including France and Belgium. At the other extreme, some governments require women to wear hijabs in public spaces. We believe that the decision to wear or not to wear religious attire is an individual choice.

Some countries including Russia, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan use broadly written extremism or incitement laws to target members of some religious communities through raids, bans on religious literature, and unjust imprisonment. Although governments may cite security concerns to justify restrictions on religious freedom, research shows just the opposite: where governments suppress religious freedom, societal hostilities are high.

Government restrictions often coincide with societal hostilities, which may further fuel religious intolerance. Too often, religious minorities bear the brunt of such intolerance.

Anti-blasphemy laws exist in some OSCE countries, including Russia, Greece and Turkey, which can raise obstacles to full freedom of expression and the relationship between church and state. Such laws run counter to the spirit of our commitments to protect universal human rights. While Poland's offense to religious feelings law remains active, we applaud the current review by Poland's Constitutional Tribunal to determine the constitutionality of the statute.

Let me be clear: the United States Government stands against those who seek to intentionally insult the beliefs of others. But it is our responsibility to address intolerance in a manner that upholds the fundamental freedom of expression. The strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression or banning hateful remarks; it is speech advocating mutual understanding and respect.

We are deeply disturbed by attacks against members of religious communities in the OSCE region. We call on governments to take concrete action against religious intolerance. Governments that act to restrict or repress freedom of religion send the message that discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion is acceptable. Governments also bear a responsibility to protect the safety and universal rights of all their people, regardless of their faith, and to work to eliminate societal intolerance, discrimination, and violence. Disturbing trends demonstrate the need for joint action by governments and civil society to confront issues of religious intolerance, wherever they arise.

Initiatives such as United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 provide the public space to work together to combat intolerance, discrimination, and violence against persons based on religion or belief. We remain committed to working with governments and civil society to promote religious freedom around the world.

Thank you.