

Foreign Secretary's message:

Thank you for attending this groundbreaking conference at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to explore how freedom of religion and belief can help the struggle against violent extremism.

Our immediate goal is to destroy Daesh, a failing movement that is firmly on the road to defeat. But this conference is about preventing extremism from taking root in the first place by examining how to combat poisonous ideologies at their source.

I recognise that even our wisest experts can differ over how to tackle this sensitive task. But I hope we can all agree that a key part of the answer is to build open, equitable and plural societies in which fundamental rights are respected.

This includes freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, both of which will be discussed in detail at this conference. Wherever people are free to follow their own consciences, they have a greater ability to challenge extremist ideologies and expose them as affronts to the common good.

In one way or another, human societies have always wrestled with the problem of how to cope with their differences. But the networked and interconnected nature of our modern world seems to have made this harder. Years of global inaction have created a dangerous climate of impunity in which violent prejudice can thrive and individuals are persecuted – or even murdered – because of their religion or beliefs. So the years of drift must end: as an international community we need to unite against extremism.

London is not only the location of the conference, but it strives to be a model for the kind of society we seek to build. During my time as Mayor, I gloried in our capital's proud tradition of openness and tolerance and its ability to accept people from every background. When we succeed, we are the richer for it: culturally certainly, but we become more stable and prosperous too.

This conference brings together parliamentarians, diplomats, academics, journalists, faith leaders and civil society representatives, many of whom have practical experience of standing up against terror and hate. I want everyone to leave this event inspired and better equipped to tackle extremism.