

**Note of Roundtable discussion on Preventing Violent Extremism and
Freedom of Religion or Belief**

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University of Sussex, UK

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Following the FCO's November 2016 Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) by Building Inclusive and Plural Societies, this roundtable brought together a small group of academics, experts and practitioners in PVE and Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) to build on the conference discussions and seek to identify practical next steps to strengthen approaches to the practice of both PVE and FoRB.

While the November 2016 Conference was warmly welcomed by all the roundtable participants, questions were raised about the extent to which the Conference had translated in to tangible actions for UK policy-makers and practitioners, particularly with respect to FoRB. One of the objectives of the roundtable discussion was therefore to identify tangible actions for UK policy-makers and practitioners, that could move forward approaches to CVE and FoRB on the ground. This note captures the key messages and recommendations from the discussion, which took place under Chatham House rules.

Key messages:

- **Clear objectives:** Participants felt that a clear articulation of UK Government objectives with respect to FoRB would be valuable. It was important to recognise that CVE and FoRB are two distinct issues that require fundamentally different (although potentially overlapping) approaches. Addressing one would not necessarily address the other, and in some cases there may even be a tension between them. While the UK Government had a clear high-level objective for CVE, the high-level objective with respect to FoRB in its own right (rather than linked to CVE) had been less clearly articulated in public.
- **Prioritisation:** A clear FoRB objective would help to identify priority countries and regions for FoRB activity. In setting priorities for activity, the Government should consider the relative severity, and short and long term impact of restrictions on FoRB. Not all infringements of FoRB were equal, some (e.g. imprisonment, enslavement or execution of certain religions, or of those accused of 'apostasy') were more severe than others

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- (e.g. restrictions on freedom of religious expression). In addition, the Government should consider the longer-term impacts of specific infringements of FoRB. The discussion highlighted a number of current examples of urgent threats to ancient traditions of religious plurality from a combination of violent extremism and migration (e.g. in Syria, Iraq and Northern Nigeria), and the risk that the loss of long established religiously diverse societies could lead to increasing polarisation and extremism and rise in violations of FoRB in future. Finally, in setting priorities the UK Government needed to consider where it could have an impact. In some regions, local perceptions about the UK Government (or governments in general) meant that the potential for positive impact might be limited. **Recommendation:** The UK Government should focus resources on areas where threats to FoRB were most severe, where conditions were deteriorating and where action could be taken.
- **Understanding local context:** Participants agreed that a one-size fits all approach could not deliver significant improvements in FoRB or CVE. It was essential to understand how FoRB and Violent Extremism fitted into local social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Gaining an accurate picture of FoRB conditions on the ground in different states was an essential starting point for engagement and developing local and regional strategies. FoRB and CVE would require tailored approaches in different places. **Recommendation:** Consider action points and recommendations from November 2016 Conference and identify which measures would be appropriate for different priority FoRB/ CVE contexts.
- **Develop FoRB interventions that meet local needs:** Participants emphasised the need to identifying and respond to local issues and priorities around FoRB, rather than simply imposing models and understanding of the problem from elsewhere. Practical interventions need to reflect different local situations and the timescales. Responding to local priorities may require working with a more diverse range of local partners (including non-state and local level actors) and more flexible small grant funding than is currently available. In some cases, progress on FoRB may be best achieved through activities not directly or primarily focussed on obvious FoRB issues. Participants also recognised the tension between the desire for flexibility and the need for transparency and accountability in the distribution of public funds and the challenge of identifying and engaging suitable non-state partners and implementers. Power analyses of local actors were identified as a valuable activity in order to identify potential partners to engage.
- **Engagement of religious leaders and communities:** Religious leaders and communities are key stakeholders in FoRB and related issues, but participants felt that they were often under consulted and engaged in Government FoRB activities and approaches. Often engagement with religious leaders and communities was primarily from a CVE perspective, which was not necessarily constructive from an FoRB point of view. However, participants noted that it was important not to exaggerate the

- influence of religious leaders. Religion played different roles in different communities and religious communities and leaders would not be relevant in every context. The issues on which it was valuable to engage religious leaders and communities would vary from place to place.
- **Whether to engage on religious doctrine?** The roundtable exposed different views on the role that policy-makers should seek to play in influencing the beliefs of local faith leaders. On the one hand, a number of risks of seeking to influence local religious leaders beliefs were highlighted: it might result in their disengagement; their losing influence within their communities if they became seen as stooges of outside influences; or a risk of parallel rhetorics emerging as religious leaders sought to give one message to the international community but a different message to their local audiences. Furthermore, the very process of engagement by Government with religious leaders and communities could influence the structures and hierarchies of those communities in ways that were difficult to predict but could be damaging to FoRB (and CVE) objectives. On the other hand it was argued that in many cases it was specific interpretations of different religions that were the root cause of FoRB and CVE problems. In some cases it was therefore necessary seek to influence local religious leaders away from beliefs and practices that were incompatible with FoRB or promoted violent extremism. Exploring non-Western traditions of religious tolerance could increase the effectiveness of this approach.
- **Giving officials the tools to do more on FoRB and CVE:**
 - **Deeper understanding of the role of religion in different societies:** In order to understand the local FoRB and CVE context, develop tailored interventions, and make judgements about which religious leaders and communities to engage, officials (across all relevant government departments) needed to be equipped with a strong understanding of the broader role of religion in society. Participants noted that officials often needed to be encouraged to see religion as a potential force for good, rather than primarily as a risk factor (often the prevailing view of religion in CVE approaches). A deeper understanding of the role of religion in society, would improve the quality of official reporting and analysis on FoRB issues and enable linkages to be made more effectively between FoRB, CVE and other potentially linked policy areas, such as development, governance, migration and education. Improved understanding of the broader role of religion in society was not an end in itself, it would enable officials to ask the right questions, engage with the right people and communities, and to use language that facilitates that engagement.
 - **Language:** Participants agreed on the importance of using language that was appropriate to the local context when engaging local religious leaders and communities on FoRB and CVE issues. A

- deeper understanding of the role of religion in society would help officials to select appropriate language for the local context. For example, focussing on local traditions of religious tolerance may in some cases be more constructive than a strong focus on an individual rights based approach to FoRB. Clear high-level objectives on FoRB would help officials to make judgements on how to frame strong arguments in favour of FoRB relevant to the local context. **Recommendation:** The Government's core script for officials on FoRB (FoRB toolkit and other documents) should be tailored to different contexts and include clear definitions of UK Government understanding of FoRB-PVE relations and terms like 'extremism' or 'radicalisation'.

- **Beyond government-to-government activity:** Participants agreed that FoRB and CVE required more than just Government intervention. There were limits to the reach and influence of Government, particularly in matters of religion. Behaviour change was effected primarily at the local level. Local and non-state actors were therefore important. Education also played a key role, but it was often a sensitive topic for Government-to-Government engagement. But Governments did have a key role to play, particularly in providing mechanisms through which grievances, including about FoRB, could be aired. Top down (i.e. high-level declaratory statements and government to government activity) and bottom up (i.e. engaging with local stakeholders to understand FoRB and CVE issues and developing activity in response to local concerns) were not mutually exclusive. Both had a role. **Recommendation:** It was suggested that a study into how national and local governments and non-government actors interact in FoRB and CVE contexts in priority regions could be useful to identify the ways in which local and national Governments could play a positive role in FoRB.

- **Collaboration and information sharing:** Cross-Government understanding of FoRB in the UK was felt to be an obstacle to more effective FoRB activity. A number of examples of effective collaboration and information sharing on FoRB/ CVE issues were highlighted, for example:
 - A UK-US transatlantic policy dialogue on FoRB and Foreign Policy led by the University of Sussex
 - An initiative by the UK Jewish community to track and share information on anti-Semitic attacks was highlighted as an example of effective and systematic data gathering;