

Blog: Possible impact of Brexit on foreign policy in the context of FORB

Now that Prime Minister Theresa May has announced that she will invoke Article 50 in March 2017, the impact of Brexit on the United Kingdom's foreign policy looms closer. It is perhaps inevitable that much of the government's attention will focus on mapping out a coherent plan for Brexit.

The main concern is likely to be on replacing any trade relationships that are lost through withdrawal from the EU. Prime Minister May's confirmation that she will opt for a "hard" Brexit ("Brexit means Brexit") indicates that previous hopes that Britain can still benefit from the single market are now even more questionable. As British foreign policy becomes focused on developing new strategies for trade and business outside of the EU circle, there is a risk that this will be at the expense of the development of its global diplomatic efforts towards human rights in the face of what is considered more pressing priorities. The risk is specifically relevant to the freedom of religion or belief (FORB).

The status of FORB in the UK's foreign policy is further threatened by the fact the UK will no longer be part of the EU network that considers FORB as a "priority issue." For example, despite significant criticism, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) spends €5million (£4.2m), a quarter of its total budget of €20m (£17m), on FORB. Moreover, in 2013, the EU released official guidelines on the promotion and protection of FORB, which it would adhere to when dealing with other countries.¹ The EIDHR's 2017 call for proposals aimed to support civil society's contribution to the world-wide implementation of these guidelines, with a focus on dialogue and mediation efforts. The 2016 global call for proposals meanwhile addressed rights of persons belonging to minorities, including religious minorities. The EU's agenda on promoting FORB is also advanced by requiring legal guarantees with respect to a commitment to religious freedom in trade agreements, aid packages and humanitarian projects around the world.²

While the safeguarding of FORB has been described as "a top human rights priority" for the British government, the question arises as to where the UK will invest the money that would have gone to the EU for such projects. The UK reportedly donated approximately \$1.5 billion to the European Commission for foreign aid annually.³ These funds can now be directed elsewhere. The re-allocation of this budget should reflect the British government's stated priorities including FORB.

It is important to note that while departure from the EU impacts UK foreign policy, many things remain the same. For instance, formal membership of international organisations such as the UN, the G7, NATO and the Commonwealth remain unchanged. Therefore, Brexit does not need to equate to an 'insular' UK. Rather, promoting FORB through these networks becomes more important than ever. The 53 member countries of the Commonwealth make up 27% of the world's countries,

¹ *EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief*, Foreign Affairs Council meeting, 24 June 2013, at [http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/fiji/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/eu_guidelines_on_the_promotion_and_protection_of_freedom_of_religion_or_belief_\(june_24_2013_fac\).pdf](http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/fiji/press_corner/all_news/news/2013/eu_guidelines_on_the_promotion_and_protection_of_freedom_of_religion_or_belief_(june_24_2013_fac).pdf).

² Pasquale Annicchino, *Freedom of Religion or Belief in Foreign Policy: Which One?* European University Institute (2013), at p.44, at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/30059>.

³ Mirette Mabrouk and Tarek Radwan, 'Brexit's Impact on UK Development and Foreign Policy in the Middle East', *Atlantic Council*, 1 July 2016, at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/brexit-s-impact-on-uk-development-and-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east>.

and with 2.2 billion people, 33% of the world's population. While it is religiously diverse, all these countries possess similar legal and judicial systems to the UK. This makes effective engagement on the protection and promotion of FORB more feasible. Since the Commonwealth does not involve binding formal obligations, it is a place where the use of 'soft power' could be particularly effective.

While the UK may no longer consider the EU as a vehicle of engagement in its foreign policy, other structures that can still be utilised in the pursuit and promotion of FORB in foreign policy remain. This should not be forgotten as the UK formulates its post-Brexit foreign policy.

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