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Policing Thought Crime Should Have No Place in the U.K. | Opinion

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In Neutral V Sweden, On Couple Four

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Parts of the United Kingdom are now policing thought crimes. This is happening under a series of local ordinances that ban prayer, including silent prayer, in the vicinity of

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First came the arrest of Isabel Vaughan-Spruce. On December 15, she was [charged](#) with failing to comply with an [ordinance](#) that set up a "buffer zone" in an area comprising of several streets around an abortion facility in Birmingham, England. Prayer is listed as a "prohibited activity" under the ordinance. Isabel was free to stand where she was, and free to think about anything else—but for directing her thoughts to God on the issue of abortion, she was arrested, and now could be tried and convicted of a crime.

Video [footage](#) of Isabel's arrest went [viral](#) on [Twitter](#). When probed by the police, she made clear that she was not there to protest. In response to questioning, she stated that she "might be" praying inside her head. For this, she was searched, including through her hair, and placed under arrest. Isabel heads to court in early February, and could face up to two years in prison.

Now, Adam Smith-Connor similarly has been [fined](#) for breaching a Bournemouth, England, "buffer zone" order. Adam stood within the zone, on the public street, praying in silence for the baby—a son—he had lost to abortion years ago. He prayed too for the men and women facing similar difficult decisions today. He stood with his back to the facility, mindful of the privacy of staff and attendees. After a few minutes, he was approached by "community safety accredited officers," tasked with enforcing the censorship zone.



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LONDON, ENGLAND - SEPTEMBER 3: The anti-abortion 10 Million Lives Too Many march proceeds up Whitehall on September 3, 2022 in London, England. **GUY SMALLMAN/GETTY IMAGES**

As in Isabel's case, video [footage](#) of Adam's interaction with the officers dispels any possibility that this is about something other than prayer. As one officer states, "ultimately, I have to go along with the guidelines of the Public Space Protection Order, to say that we are in the belief that therefore you are in breach of clause 4a, which says about prayer." Adam interjects, "I'm just standing praying," only for her to respond, "I understand that. But the PSPO [ordinance] is in place for a reason and we have to follow through on those regulations."

It must be emphasized that Adam's only transgression was prayer, and he was fined literally for the contents of his mind. If he had been thinking about anything else, he would have faced no penalty. Bizarrely, the [order](#) that he is accused of violating also prohibits genuflecting, sprinkling holy water on the ground, or the crossing of oneself, among other activities.

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What we are seeing in the U.K. is a rapidly escalating effort to criminalize the basic exercise of fundamental freedoms. Isabel and Adam are but the first in a potentially very long line of similar cases. The U.K. Parliament is now debating legislation that would establish censorship zones around abortion facilities nationwide. These zones are fundamentally incompatible with a free society. They directly violate myriad fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and religion, and as evidenced by what has already transpired, easily slide into the policing of people's thoughts.

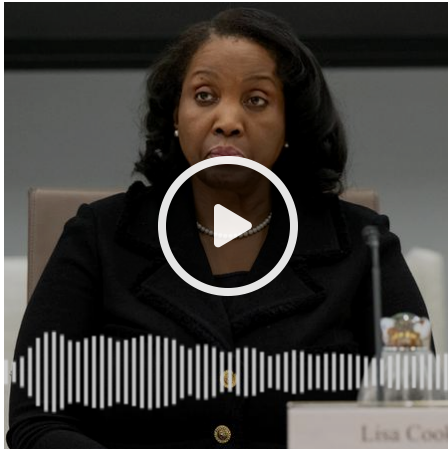
"Buffer zone" proponents cite harassment as justification for this kind of infringement. Let's be unmistakably clear in our response—harassment is a crime. The harassment of any person, including a woman facing a difficult situation, is an abomination already covered under U.K. law. These zones are drastically distinct from any legitimate means to protect women. No democratic state should be in the business of criminalizing thought.

Nobody benefits when a free state voluntarily relinquishes the essential attributes of freedom. And every person, regardless of their stance on abortion, should be horrified by what is happening to fundamental freedoms in the U.K. Even if we disagree, let us not lose sight of the fact that all people have the right to peacefully pray, act, and yes, even think, in accordance with their beliefs.

Ryan Christopher is director of ADF UK, which is supporting the defense of Isabel Vaughan-Spruce and Adam Smith-Connor. Follow him on Twitter: [@RyanChrist1984](#)

The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.

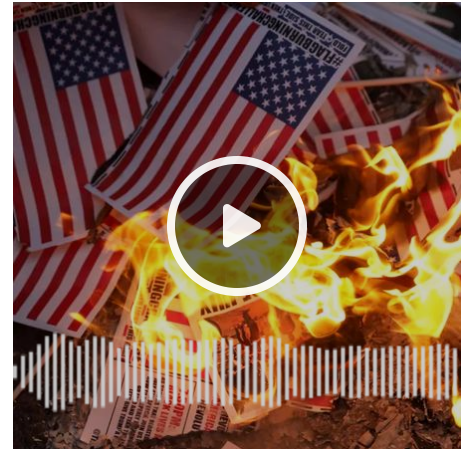
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