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Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: the New Normal ?

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Every year we gather here at the HDIM and reiterate our concerns and worries about the violation of fundamental rights and ask participating states to do something about it. In the past we talked about intolerance and discrimination against Muslims but instead of improving the situation in Europe and elsewhere is now worse. Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, in other words, Islamophobia, seems now to be the new normal. The continent-wide marginalization and stigmatization of Muslim communities is being debated, legislated, and normalised. There is an urgent need to address the link between rising Islamophobia and the rolling back of civil liberties. More than a week ago, Muslims in several EU countries celebrated their Holiday Feast with a BAN on Halal slaughter (incidentally, kosher slaughter was banned too). I am not even going to raise the issue of the European Court of Justice decision (14 March 2017) which upheld the right of private enterprises to prohibit the wearing of religious garb or signs by their employees, a ruling which will lead to work place discrimination of Muslim women but also of Jewish men who wear kippas, Sikh men who wear turbans, people who wear crosses. This decision might affect all of them, but mainly and disproportionately Muslim women.

We continue talking about `intolerance and discrimination against Muslims that is Islamophobia at a time when a highly moralized rhetoric of good and evil has become increasingly strident in Western political discourse in the last decade or so, not just as a result of the `war on terror` but also in the wake of the resurgence of social and political conservatisms and their critique of the moral relativism of liberalism and multiculturalism. It has asserted a hardening of boundaries between good and bad, between law-abiding citizens and wrongdoers, endemic to a global culture of fear. The emergence of what is often referred to as `Islamophobia` has become inextricably bound to this rhetoric. Islamophobia, as the intensification of long-standing anti-Muslim prejudice amounting to a widespread hostility in the west, is a complex and dynamic phenomenon.

The 16-year long so-called War on Terror, launched in the aftermath of 9/11, has legitimised racialised violence against Muslims in countries across both sides of the Atlantic. Even a cursory look at empirical research into representations of Islam and Muslims in the print and social media would uncover the extent of the problem, i.e. the print media's unstinting demonization of Islam and Muslims. I do not have time to touch on the core issue of the laicist and anti-Islamic preoccupation with religion seen as ideology, which is being used as the primary explanatory factor for terrorism and which is, in its turn, constitutive of the anti-Muslim/Islamophobic paradigm in which 'irreconcilable culture clash theories' proliferate, to the exclusion of evidence-based analysis and empirically tested causal relationships that demote the primacy of religion as an explanatory variable.

Twenty years on from the Runnymede report, we're no closer to overcoming Islamophobia. We are still in need of reminding people that no-one's presence should be viewed as an immediate threat because of their identity.

The otherisation of Muslims does not only dehumanise the victims, but evidently also shapes the discourse that justifies the so-called `crusade` against Muslims.

As Personal Representative of the Chair in Office on combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, namely Islamophobia, I looked at the 7 recommendations I made at the end of my speech a year ago, at the HDIM 2016, and asked myself:

What has happened since then? Is there any improvement in terms of combatting Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims? Any example of good practices? What have the Participating States done in the meantime in regard to:

1. recording anti-Muslim/Islamophobic crimes as a category of hate crime by the police
2. protecting free speech while developing good guidelines to tackle online hate speech and considering primary legislation to deal with social media offences and online hate speech
3. developing teaching materials to educate young people on anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination and prioritising religious education in the national curriculum to prepare young people for life in a religiously plural society
4. tackling religious discrimination in the workplace and address the low level of economic activity among Muslims through targeted interventions at stages of recruitment, retention and promotion; improving access to employment for Muslim women. (particularly after the ECJ decision which almost legitimises discrimination against Muslim women)
5. preserving the Human Rights Act and the protection of minority rights including religious slaughter (on the contrary there are more and more bans on religious slaughter now), circumcision and the wearing of religious dress or symbols
6. curbing the encroachment of counter-terrorism policies on civil liberties by working with Muslim communities, not against them, in the so-called "de-radicalisation" programmes
7. committing to democracy and human rights promotion abroad, including the rights of religious minorities

Indeed, there are a few promising developments, such as the Berlin police recording hate crimes against Muslims as Islam-feindlich/anti-Islamic crimes since January 2017 (after my serving under the German chairmanship of the OSCE, so it makes me happy to see that my recommendations were useful). The British police too started recording Islamophobic crimes as anti-Muslim hate crimes, though the Prevent strategy still seems not to be considered the right approach by all parties involved. We therefore need more such examples, showing widespread determination on the side of Participating States in combatting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the Canadian parliament for the courageous act of passing the motion that condemns Islamophobia and requests that the government recognises the need to "quell the public climate of fear and hate". Yes Islamophobic incidents continue, but this gives a strong message that Canadian authorities take Islamophobia seriously. The motion tasks a parliamentary committee with launching a study on how the government could address the issue, with recommendations due in mid-November.

The study should look at how to "develop a whole-of-government approach to reducing or eliminating systemic racism and religious discrimination, including Islamophobia." This deserves praising, and sets a good example for the other OSCE participating states.

Of course, we continue living through troubled times. The latest cases of violence and terror that stroke us were Barcelona and Charlottesville. In little more than a year, militants have used vehicles as weapons to kill nearly 150 people in France, Germany, Britain, Sweden, Spain, and Turkey. In some of these terror attacks, the names of the attackers but also the names of some of the victims were from Muslim-known background. Does this justify Islamophobic hatred, intolerance and discrimination against the entire community of Muslims?

According to Europol 2017 report on Terrorism, I quote

"The largest number of attacks in which the terrorist affiliation could be identified were carried out by ethno-nationalist and separatist extremists (99)." (End of Quote)

The same report shows that in some EU Member States the right-wing extremist scene increased its activities against minority migrant communities to a level causing concern to authorities, and xenophobic offences became more violent. (p. 45-46) The perceived threat from Islamisation remains a key topic on the RWE agenda and has been used by the right-wing scene to induce public opinion to adopt its xenophobic and anti-Muslim position. These topics are exploited to spread fear and concern. Events such as the Paris attacks in 2015, Brussels and Berlin in 2016, as well as the sexual assaults during New Year's Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne, serve as justification for xenophobic offences. (p.46)

The Report shows us that overall there was a sharp increase in the number of racially or religiously aggravated offences recorded by the police.

The question then is: What kind of public policies should we develop then?

No terror act justifies intolerance, discrimination and Hate Crimes against any particular community or group. All hate should be put down.

At the end of the day, we should fight against all racially or religiously aggravated crimes which derive from intolerance, discrimination and hatred against particular communities.

Following the Barcelona terror attack, although there were isolated reports of violence against Muslims, Barcelona appears to be generally resisting being drawn into a post-attack culture war. In a city where Muslims have lived for centuries, officials and citizens have mainly chosen to speak out against the potential for the kind of Islamophobic backlash seen elsewhere in Europe. At a news conference on the investigation, Catalonia's regional president, grew most open and loud when he spoke in defense of the local Moroccan Muslim population. "The Moroccan people are integrated in Catalonia, and they have made important contributions to the community," he underlined.

Back in Charlottesville, Virginia USA, the late Heather's mother said at the memorial service addressing the authorities:

'Find what's wrong, don't ignore it, don't look the other way. Say to yourself, 'What can I do to make a difference?'

In this context, we should perhaps reassess once again what capacity-building activities have been implemented for law-enforcement, prosecution and judicial officials dealing with anti-Muslim hate crimes and discrimination.

One problem is that there is still no Ministerial Council deliverable (‘a working definition’ or decision) on combatting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

We all know that ‘Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims,’ that is Islamophobia, is a complex and contested phenomenon with social, political, policy and cultural salience, expressed in speech, writing and visual forms as well as in the form of physical and violent acts, all of which are underpinned by sinister stereotypes and negative character traits, that directly and indirectly impacts the everyday lives of many ordinary Muslims. We are also challenged by lack political willingness and a non-hypocritical approach to the problem. Any decision/definition needs to help with the recognition of Islamophobic actions and ways of thinking rather than whether someone is or is not Islamophobic.

Based on this approach, I would like to propose a working definition derived from a definition originally presented by Ömür Orhun, the former Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in previous years:

“Islamophobia is a contemporary form of racism and xenophobia motivated by an orchestrated fear, mistrust and hatred of Muslims and Islam. Manifesting through intolerance, discrimination and adverse public discourse against Muslims and Islam, Islamophobia is mainly based on stigmatization of Islam and its followers, and as such, an affront to the human rights and dignity of Muslims. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of Islamophobia are directed toward Muslim or non-Muslim individuals and/or their property, toward Muslim community institutions and religious facilities.” (B Senay)

Now the point is: regardless of those Islamophobe extremists and hate-mongers, who claim that ‘*Christian Europe is in a new phase of a very old war since the gates of Vienna was under siege, and that Islamization is the real threat*’, regardless of this hate-mongering, I hope the Ministerial Council can move on with the above working definition on combatting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Should we then by any chance still hope and expect that the current Chairmanship and the next Chairmanship use their power to take up a strong position with a stable budget to support activities on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims?

I would like to conclude with the words of Heyer's brother from Charlottesville, Virginia:

"Heyer wanted fairness and justice in her early years, even if she didn't agree with someone's viewpoint, she still wanted to understand it" he said.

This is what we should stand for: 'fairness and justice...if we don't do what is necessary - the extra mile if necessary - to combat anti-Muslim and Islamophobic xenophobia and hatred, we will jeopardize peace and living together. Say NO to Islamophobic hatred and intolerance but say it LOUDLY, and be a brave heart, not just a player of -PC- political correctness.

Last but not least, freedom of expression is precious. But it is clear that hatred has many faces, and hate-mongers should not be allowed to abuse freedom of expression, and manipulate the fine line between freedom of expression and hate speech.

My seven recommendations from last year, which I referred to in the beginning, are still valid as long as we allow Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims to be the New Normal.

We should not let that happen.

Thank you.