

Side Event organized by COJEP International

(HDIM, Warsaw, 25 September 2007)

INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS : YOUTH AND EDUCATION

***Speaking Notes of Ambassador Ömür Orhun,
Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and
Discrimination against Muslims***

Sharing experience of successful engagement with young Muslims; assisting policy makers to identify strategies to enhance the integration of younger Muslims into communities; and providing an opportunity for Muslim women to contribute to the way policies are shaped and to enhance their role are highly relevant, topical and important issues, that deserve close attention.

Majority of the Muslim communities in Western Europe and Northern America are of younger generations, mostly below 25.

They are becoming more and more alienated from the societies in which they live. However, only a tiny minority are involved with extremist groups.

Alienation and the resulting frustration has increased in the post 9/11 period.

What are the causes of alienation of the Muslim youth and how can radicalization be prevented needs to be analyzed and answered correctly.

Causes of alienation:

- Disaffection caused by humiliation, mainly through negative media stereotyping and political discourse.
- Discrimination and manifestations of racism, at times resulting in hate crimes. (Leading to fear, isolation, frustration, vulnerability, rootlessness and despair)
- Exclusion and lack of recognition, resulting also in deprivation of religious identity.
- Educational under-achievement and higher levels of unemployment.
- Police practices, such as stop and search, arbitrary detention or arrest, house raids, etc.
- Generation gap – differing lives at home and at work place, school, etc.
- Lack of a real sense of community or cultural identity, being in-between two cultures/systems, leading to an identity crisis.
- Concerns related to foreign developments, real or perceived atrocities against Muslims in other parts of the world.
- Lack of experience of democratic societies.
- Sense of injustice/under development of the Islamic world in general, fuelled by charismatic Muslim leaders.

Additionally, although they or their parents are coming mainly from rural areas, ironically the urban context is the determinant factor for the Muslim youth of the West. Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, etc. are today also Muslim cities.

However, the labour market is segmented. The Muslim youth are looking for jobs in service sectors, in construction and farming, but not in white collar professions. This tendency must be reversed.

On the other hand, there is a growing tendency (among the Muslim younger generations) for Islamic way of life and for a more conservative outlook, which might also be called perpetuation of traditionalism.

What to do, both to overcome alienation and to prevent radicalization?

A holistic approach is a must, encompassing all aspects of the problem, but not searching for piece-meal solutions.

First of all, the Muslim populations in general and the Muslim youth should not be seen as a security risk or threat.

There must be political will to solve the problems encountered, but not only police measures. Therefore, soft solutions should be preferred. Additionally, necessary resources must be allocated.

Resilience of the Muslim youth need to be strengthened to enable them to resist extremist tendencies. In this respect, expanding opportunities for youth mobilization, including youth movements and student exchange programs, can be sought.

Governments must work with Muslim communities to increase their sense of belonging and participation. (Participation promotion) Sound integration policies should be devised and implemented. Trust and confidence must be built, not only through Muslim organizations dominated by the older generation, but through youth outreach.

Youngsters must be assisted to express their feelings and resentments in a peaceful and democratic manner. They should also be assisted to engage with mainstream political activities.

Eradication of poverty, provision of adequate housing and full and equal access to the job market are important tools that need to be utilized to solve existing problems.

Media and the politicians must be very careful in their discourse related to Islam and Muslims. Stereotyping, abusive attributions and generalizations lead to marginalization and alienation of Muslim communities on the one hand and to more rigid attitudes by the mainstream communities on the other.

Education and training, both for the mainstream communities and for Muslim and migrant populations are the key to many problems:

- a) Civic education, addressing issues of identity and fostering respect for diversity, also teaching Muslims of their rights.
- b) Cross-cultural education or history of humanity (inclusive education about the world and its peoples
- c) Media literacy training, exposure to electronic media.
- d) Mother tongue education for migrants.
- e) Religious education, also for diverse religious beliefs.
- f) Professional education, to expand opportunities; apprenticeship and training for employment.
- g) Training for teachers, Imams and for law enforcement officials.

On the other hand, mainstream communities need to know Islam in general terms, to give them a sense of respect, tolerance and co-existence. (Cohesive societies) Furthermore, governments or the civil society should not insist on creating an artificial "European Islam", but should try to promote the well-being of Muslims of Europe.

Finally, on a global scale, dialogue, interaction and understanding between religions, cultures and ethnicities must be promoted. (Alliance of Civilizations principles) In the case of Muslim youth, a Global Muslim Youth Alliance can contribute to a better and more prosperous world. On the other hand, best practices of different countries should be shared with others and be utilized as appropriate. In that respect, role models can also be constructive.