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At the request of Ambassador Ömür Orhun, the Personal Representative on combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, the attached version of an article he wrote in the Bi-Monthly Bulletin "Conflict in Focus" is being distributed to all OSCE Delegations.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN ISLAMOPHOBIA AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ambassador Ömür Orhun*

In the aftermath of the Cold War, international relations and security arrangements acquired some new characteristics. Firstly, they became more dynamic. Secondly, new values, new norms and new aspirations appeared. Thirdly, pre-Cold War structures and international arrangements went through dramatic changes.

The effect of these developments was also felt in the Middle East, adding new dimensions to the existing issues. Aside from the Arab - Israeli conflict, as we all know, the Middle East is a region that faces important social, economic and political problems.

The Middle East

The new millennium is not so different from the previous ones as far as enduring conflicts are concerned. The Middle East conflict, or more appropriately, the Arab - Israeli conflict, which is one of the most persistent conflicts history has ever witnessed, has its roots in earlier times and has also tested the strategic tendencies beyond the region.

With the promising beginnings of the 1990's, hopes were raised that many of the intractable conflicts that dragged on for decades might be close to resolution. It soon became evident; however, that such hopes were mostly based on false premises, at least as far as the Middle East is concerned.

The efforts to negotiate a comprehensive and lasting peace moved slowly forward at the end of the last millennium, with changes in perspectives from optimism to pessimism and realism. However, in the end dreams for peace were once more deferred.

At the same time, one of the most negative and dangerous by-products of September 11 attacks in the USA started to surface in the West European and North American countries; manifestations of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims begun to acquire growing proportions, with effects felt not only in these countries, but in the Muslim world and the Middle East as well. Thus, a new and unwelcome chapter is opened in the long history of tension between the Muslim world and the West.

Discrimination

Discrimination is the denial or rejection of some rights,

privileges or attributes to some members of a society, which other members of that society enjoy. As such, discrimination means an unfavorable treatment of some by the majority, because of their difference in race, ethnicity, religion or belief, gender, color and similar traits.⁽¹⁾ Therefore, discrimination is based on the assumption of possessing negative attributes by the discriminated. In this regard, discrimination is a potential source of conflict depending on the extent and intensity of the pressures exerted to discriminate.

Discrimination is also built around the notion of the majority being superior to or better than the supposedly inferior minority. Therefore, unless and until discrimination is eliminated, conflict will continue. In other words, the struggle against discrimination is also a struggle to prevent conflict based on discrimination.

Most states in the broader Middle Eastern and the Euro - Asian regions have multi - ethnic societies, and such societies, by definition, are prone to discriminatory tendencies. Some of these societies have been multi-ethnic for longer periods of time, whereas in some other societies, recent settlements of considerable foreign elements (for example in the form of guest workers), is a new phenomenon, which entails all the problems associated with this new experience.

In our contemporary world, racial discrimination is a criminal offence, whereas denial of certain rights or privileges to some, openly or implicitly, is not a rare case. Conflicts also arise out of such denials or rejections. In some instances, discrimination leading to conflict also evolves into violence, at times becoming unmanageable.

Violent conflicts can be countered through different strategies; collectively by a group of countries or individually by the affected country. In the latter case, efforts are needed to create or restore conditions to enable establishing stability and calm, also striving to ensure non-repetition of similar problems. If one single country does not have the capacity or willingness to challenge the issues faced, than a cooperative or collective effort would be in order. That is why the international community has designed arrangements and measures to promote stability and confidence, minimizing sources of tension and conflict.

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(1) For a legal definition of discrimination, please refer to relevant international instruments.

Islamophobia

Muslim communities in Western Europe and North America are experiencing an increasingly hostile environment towards them. This environment started to be more pronounced in the post September 11 period. It has become characterized by, suspicion and prejudice; ignorance; negative or patronizing images; discrimination (including in housing and employment prospects); stereotyping all Muslims or Islam in general as "terrorist, violent or otherwise unfit"; lack of provision, recognition and respect for Muslims in public institutions, as well as attacks, abuse, harassment and violence directed against persons perceived to be Muslim and against mosques, cemeteries and Muslim property.

This is 'Islamophobia', which can also be defined in short as "fear or suspicion of Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them."

Islamophobia has existed for a very long time, albeit in a rather subdued form, and is deeply rooted in prejudice. However, has become a topical issue since 2001, with devastating effects not only on the lives of the Muslim communities, but also on the societies where they live. Islamophobia, whether in the shape of intolerance and discrimination, or whether in the form of violence, is a violation of human rights and is a threat to social and political cohesion.

Major international organizations have recognized that negative connotations of Islamophobia may lead to exclusion and self-exclusion of especially younger generations, with obvious negative results in terms of self-esteem and social integration. It is also acknowledged that persistent forms of Islamophobia and in particular its repercussions through the mass media represent a threat to peace, stability and democracy.

To remedy this negative and disturbing phenomenon, sound strategies and educational approaches must be developed and vigorously implemented. Increasing understanding and respect for religious diversity would be the first step to identifying and developing criteria for good practices in combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

This phenomenon has two additional adverse consequences:

- a. It undermines efforts of integration and brings about negative trends in attempts to create an atmosphere of harmony.
- b. An even wider fault line between the Muslim and the Christian worlds is emerging.

What is needed is a positive consciousness on the

necessity of a new relationship among all peoples to attain solidarity through respect for cultural diversity. Responsible members of communities, both in the West and in the Islamic world, must have the wisdom and also the courage to work and to live together. Thereby any clash or any perception of clash among civilizations, cultures or religions can be eliminated.

There is a need for an intellectual and ethical strategy to avoid political exploitation of the issues related to discrimination, intolerance and Islamophobia.

Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is not only a matter of discrimination against a specific religious group, but it also deeply affects international relations as well as the internal stability of Western societies. As such, it is a multifaceted question and must be addressed through a holistic approach.

In this respect, I want to underline the following points:

- The quality of life of Muslims living in Western societies must be improved. This will lead to better understanding and better integration, thus to lessening of mutual mistrust.
- Muslims should not be seen as second-class citizens; they must not be demonized, marginalized, feared or despised.
- The war on terror must not become a war on Muslims.
- It should be recognized that Muslims have the same basic needs and desires as others, these are material well-being, cultural acceptance and religious freedom, without political or social intimidation. In that vein, Muslims should not be marginalized nor attempted to be assimilated, but should be accommodated. Accommodation is the best strategy for integration.

On the other hand, I also want to stress the importance of social harmony and respect, especially respect for "the other", whoever this other may be, search for commonalities rather than divisions and promote inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

Conflict Prevention

Conflict prevention in the Middle East has always been a difficult task. Efforts towards this end, requires long-term commitment and a sound insight of the region.

On the other hand, trust and confidence of all the parties involved is a must. This in turn necessitates that any step towards a settlement should be coupled with a strong sense of justice, which is fundamental in the regional context.

Given these requirements, for a true dialogue and mutual understanding between the West and the Moslem world, a prerequisite for the West is to play a constructive and

effective role in conflict prevention or resolution. Only through a relationship of confidence and partnership can the Western parties play such a role.

However, growing Islamophobia in the West does not help to foster trust and respect among the sides. On the contrary, it creates distrust and confrontation.

At a time when there is a growing tendency in the West to associate terror with Islam, how can one expect to create a common platform whereby we can all work cooperatively towards peace?

Islam constitutes the spiritual foundation of a very large segment of the Middle Eastern population. Therefore, demonizing Islam does not contribute to an environment conducive to peace and cooperation.

All the more, given that the main potential conflict in the Middle East is not the Arab - Israeli dispute, but the democratization and liberalization of the region in line with contemporary values and principles (incorporating Islam to this endeavor), remains both a challenge and an opportunity.

Relations between the Middle Eastern (Islamic) Countries and the West

Relations between the Middle Eastern (Islamic) countries and the West are going through a state of flux. A tide of future events and developments will determine whether this flux will lead towards intensified threat and hostility, or towards mutual understanding and accommodation. Because so much is in flux, some may advocate inaction, to wait until the future is less obscure. I believe this will be a fatal mistake. While I grant the possible emergence of unpredictable events, by perseverance and good will, progress can be achieved towards ensuring stability and mutual confidence.

Mutual Responsibility

Tension and conflicts between the Islamic world and the West is mainly due to difficulties in finding a common normative framework for understanding and interaction. In other words, whether the tension and conflicts between the Islamic world and the West are real or perceived is a matter of conjecture.

There is a mutual inclination both in some Western and in some Muslim quarters for over simplification of the other's intentions and objectives.

Therefore, finding common rules of international behavior and dialogue is a mutual responsibility for lessening the real or perceived tension. In this respect, prevention of globalization of radicalism and promotion of moderation seem to be the key for a responsible attitude.

Perceived double-standards of the West by the Muslim world are another issue which needs to be addressed. Globalization is a fact and need not be challenged on purely ideological basis. However, globalization founded on the cultural and economic hegemony of the West will definitely be a risk for a sound relationship.

How to ameliorate and decrease sources of conflict?

- Creation of a common platform on a perceptual and conceptual framework will be a first step. This would require an effective strategy and a coherent agenda.
- Recognition of the relevance and binding nature of international norms and regulations is another point that calls for acceptance.
- Promotion of dialogue, harmony and respect; not only in words but also in deeds is another must.
- Addressing issues that either directly or indirectly aggravate conflicts, like poverty, high unemployment and corruption may also help ameliorate sources of conflict.
- Distancing from radicalism, fundamentalism, violence and terror, not only by the Islamic world, but also by the West is still another panacea for reconciliation.

Dialogue

The key to change and lessening conflict is closely related to the method of dialogue, where parties have to be concerned with the form as much as with the content.

Heritage of promoting and advancing dialogue is very much in the making of the Islamic world. However, dialogue can not be pursued for the sake of dialogue, but to support constructive communication. Another must in meaningful dialogue is flexibility and leniency, because flexibility leads to mutual accommodation and leniency leads to affection.

On the other hand, dialogue should be conducted in a spirit of understanding, so that priorities proposed by one party should not be seen as instructions, or the explanations provided by the other as an attempt to repudiate commitments.■