WILTON PARK – OIC CONFERENCE

"CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN EUROPE AND THE MUSLIM WORLD:

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CONSTRUCTIVE POLICIES AND PARTNERSHIPS

(2 – 3 May 2006)

SESSION 2: What is the context in which Islamophobia occurs in Europe today and what is   its cause? How are European governments responding?

(Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims)

<u>**CONTEXT**</u>

- Islamophobia   - Needs but lacks a definition

- "Fear of suspicion of Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them"

- This is a rather narrow context. Better to use the term "intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and Islam"

- Islamophobia and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is not a new phenomena. There are historical, cultural/religious and psychological reasons behind it.

- However, in the post-September 11 period, this phenomena acquired a new and disturbing dimension and the social climate facing Muslims especially in Western countries has deteriorated.

- In this period, pre-existing prejudices and discriminatory tendencies against Muslims became reinforced.

- Islamophobia is a clear manifestation of hate crime and as such generates fear, feelings of stigmatization, marginalization and rejection. The net result is heightened anxiety and rising violence.

- Also as a hate crime, Islamophobia is an assault on identity and human dignity.

- We also notice a disturbing increase in the proportion of violence targeting people, as opposed to violence targeting or involving only property.

- Range of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is dominated generally by the following:

    a) ancient hatreds, old prejudices,

    b) powerful new trend of anti-immigration,

    c) antipathy towards Muslims in general, believing that Islam is not compatible with democracy, human rights and contemporary values,

    d) political rhetoric, coupled with biased and/or misleading media coverage,

    e) identification of terrorism and violence with Islam.

- Now a few words on problems encountered by Muslims in the West:

    a) Structural problems

     - Formal relations or lack of such relations between the State and the Muslim communities

     - A vicious circle – or catch 22:

      "lack of proper knowledge of the language of the country of residence, improper housing, improper or insufficient education, leading to unequal access to the labor market"

     - Net result: sense of being rejected, stigmatization, marginalization, leading to lack of confidence in the State. (And such people are more prone to crime and illegal activities, as well as more susceptible to radical propaganda)

    b) Perceptional and behavioural problems:

     - prejudice -also against perceived Muslims

     - negative sentiments and display of such sentiments

     - media coverage –misrepresentation

     - political discourse –especially by the far right

    c) Discriminatory practices as such:

     - first point: no reliable monitoring (and in some countries only discrimination related to race monitored)

- a striking and most recent example of discrimination is the German loyalty (or conscience) test –only applied to Muslims which want to acquire citizenship
- as mentioned before, housing and employment are two major areas where discrimination occurs (not even considering Muslim sounding names)
- places of worship and burial facilities
- headscarf
- police practices –search and arrest; customs entry procedures, etc.
- harassment, vandalism, attacks only because he/she is Muslim or perceived as such.

RESPONSE – WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

I have not been asked to speak about what should be done, but only what is being done. However, I would not be doing justice to my mandate if I first do not mention what should be done and then lead on to good practices.

First of all, the European and North American countries must recognize the problem and be ready and willing to adopt a multifaceted approach.

Secondly, they must take account of the importance of the intellectual front in the fight against intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and devise a sound strategy in the fields of value systems and perceptions.

Thirdly, they must define hate crimes broadly and address the information deficit. (That is to say, collect analyze and disseminate information related to hate crimes)

Fourth, they must enact adequate legislation and implement this legislation effectively. In conjunction with national legislation, they should also implement international commitments and agreed norms.

Fifth, clear criteria for reporting and registering of hate crimes must be established and reporting of hate crimes must be encouraged.

Sixth, they should build the capacity of Muslim communities and civil society organizations and try to enable them to work with local and national authorities. In this

respect, community outreach programs will be of great use in confidence building and in creating community cohesion. (Sense of living together.)

Another point that deserves utmost importance is education. Especially younger generation should be provided with educational programs that would foster tolerance, understanding and respect to "the other." Related to education is of course training of law enforcement officials.

Furthermore, in the field of public discourse related to Muslims and Islam, two points need to be underlined:

a) Political rhetoric: Responsible politicians, both of the government and of the opposition, must underline the importance of correct and unbiased discourse and should also refrain from hate speech and other manifestations of extremism and discrimination. A message of encouraging tolerance, non-discrimination, understanding and respect to all must be voiced.

b) The media: The media can play a very positive role in promoting inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony. This is what is expected from responsible journalism. On the other hand, the media may also play a very negative and divisive role in projecting wrong and inaccurate messages. Therefore, with due respect to the freedom of expression, governments can assist or encourage creation of self-regulatory media bodies to deal with manifestations of discrimination and racism.

Finally, integration policies. The more Muslim communities will feel at home and will be truly integrated to the Western societies where they live, the easier it will be to marginalize extremism, to defuse radicalism and to overcome the perceptions of being left-out, being stigmatized and being rejected.

It is argued, and rightly so, that Europe has not been successful in its bid for integration. While the objective was to create multi-cultural societies, instead parallel, but mutually exclusive societies were born. How to remedy this situation, which can also be characterized as cultural ghettos for Muslims? I believe civic and structural integration is the answer. Muslim migrants must have a sense of being part of the larger community in which they live, take part in all parts of life and participate in the decision making process. In other words, creating cohesive societies, where mutual understanding between diverse

groups will facilitate not only the promotion of tolerance, but more importantly mutual respect for differing view points and backgrounds. The key word here is "mutual".

The real threat to tolerance and to multi-cultural societies emanates from the extremes of both groups. And here the governments and the public must remain vigilant. For peaceful co-existence to become a reality, we must reach those groups who do not wish to engage in dialogue and we must educate those who do not wish to learn or understand or accept the diversity that characterizes the Western societies.

WHAT IS BEING DONE – GOOD PRACTICES

As I see it, the confusion in the minds of the European Governments, politicians and the public in general on how to deal with Islamophobia and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims has not yet been completely cleared.

Yes, there is an awareness, even a growing awareness of the existence of the problem and of the necessity to overcome it, but as yet a coherent and over-arching policy has not been devised, let alone implemented.

All the points I tried to underline at the section dealing with what should be done need to be put into a sound framework to be implemented. As of today, we are far from there.

However, this observation does not imply that nothing has been done. Here, let me try to illustrate some good practices that were brought to my attention during the country visits that I conducted.

a) There exists some kind of legislation in almost all countries to deal with racism and discrimination, but not on Islamophobia. It would be advisible to review existing legislation, to try to standardize them and to include Islamophobia as a specific hate crime.

b) Some European countries have developed specific national action plans to deal with discrimination against Muslims. These are commendable. They should be fully implemented and reported on their results.

c) Some countries have established special bodies under names such as "Equal Treatment Commissions, Monitoring Centers on Racism and Xenophobia, Community Relations Departments, Councils for Muslim Worship, Councils for Integration, Independent Bodies Against Discrimination, Cohesion and Faith Units, Commissions on Integration and Equal Rights, Faith Communities Capacity Building Funds, etc." These initiatives are also commendable, although most of them are of a general nature, but do not aim to address Islamophobia specifically. It goes without saying that, what is important will be their effective functioning.

d) There is also growing recognition of the necessity to engage with Muslim communities and to build-up their capacities. In that respect, the increasing interaction with Muslim civil society organizations should also be noted.

e) Governments, at least at a rhetorical level, seem to accept notions such as respect to religious values, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony, value of education and the need for strong political leadership. I hope these will not remain rhetorical utterings, but be put into practice.

f) Finally, the intense debate revolving around how true integration can be achieved is a healthy first step. My sincere wish is that the next step will not lead us to even more restrictive policies, but to true, structural and civic integration.

In conclusion, let me stress that we may not have all the answers to all the problems we face. This should not lead us to doing nothing. We have to start somewhere. The first thing we must do should be reaching out across the barricades that exist or that some want to place between the Muslim world and the West. In that regard, the OIC and the Wilton Park are to be commended for trying to lift the barricades by initiating a sound dialogue.