"NON-DISCRIMINATION, RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY AND INTER-CULTURAL / INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE"

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

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of this important forum for inviting me to share my views and OSCE's perspectives, conceptual basis, priorities and activities on combating discrimination, respect for diversity and promotion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

First, a few words on the Mediterranean might be in order. "Mare Nostrum" is a region with 20 countries and territories, with more than twenty languages and with all the three monotheistic religions. As such, it can not be thought of as a single entity, but more as a geographical expression and a sea of diversity, that over the centuries have been melded into cosmopolitan centers of coexistence and, at times, of conflict. One can also detect the persistence of an underlying unitary fabric, in that the Muslim south and the Christian north are obliged to find a way to live together in a set of common circumstances. However, these religious worlds can not be considered as being isolated or separate from one another; history has mixed them up and re-shuffled them, as Andrea Riccardi had observed in his book "Mediterranean Christianity and Islam between Co-existence and Conflict". Therefore, while advocating and encouraging inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony between Islam and Christianity, we should also take lessons from areas of co-habitation of the past centuries, like the Ottoman Empire's "millet" system, and try to utilize from these lessons in solving present day problems.

Inter-cultural dialogue has often been defined as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that would lead to a deeper understanding of the other's world perceptions. Whether the objective should be confined only to achieving a "deeper understanding", or whether the aim should be broader to include conflict prevention and de-escalation, combating prejudices and stereotypes in public and political discourse and facilitating coalition-building across diverse cultural and religious communities can of course be further debated.

Before going any further, let me briefly mention OSCE's activities and perceptions on this issue.

Especially during the last decade, the OSCE underlined the importance of promoting and facilitating inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and partnerships aimed at promoting tolerance, mutual respect and understanding, and freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, at both the national and international levels. The OSCE participating States, in implementing their commitments to promote tolerance and non-discrimination, also strengthened their activities on legislation, law enforcement, education, media, data collection, migration and

integration, religious freedom, inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, including through implementation-focused thematic meetings. For example, the June 2006 Almati Tolerance Implementation Meeting aimed to underline the importance of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic institutions in creating a context for inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding, also focusing on the role of governments and civil society in promoting inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding with a view to ensuring inclusiveness, respect for diversity and freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

The Almati Meeting also provided an opportunity to:

- identify ways to use inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and civil society partnerships as a means to promote conflict prevention and de-escalation;

- explore inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic partnership and dialogue as a means to combat prejudice and stereotypes in public and political discourse;

- facilitate coalition-building across diverse cultural and religious communities and civil society groups;

- identify OSCE's role in promoting inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding.

In all of OSCE's endeavours it was stressed that dialogue is a crucial tool of any effort aimed at conflict prevention and post conflict reconciliation. It is the means through which immediate tensions which could lead to conflict can be diffused, differences and disagreements discussed, misunderstandings and misconceptions corrected, compromises identified and solutions negotiated. Without intercultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue tensions may grow to the point where they create a climate in which some will perceive violence as the only way of resolving problems.

But dialogue alone will not prevent conflicts or bring about post conflict reconciliation. It is of fundamental importance that governments take concrete steps and carefully developed measures designed to create and preserve a harmonious and inclusive society. A harmonious and inclusive society in turn enables the individual to participate in and to identify him/herself with the community as a whole. Such identification is a key factor in the prevention of future conflicts and in advancing post-conflict reconciliation.

Specific policies may be pursued to eliminate discrimination in every sphere of life and to promote social cohesion, ensuring that all communities have a voice in decision making and opportunities to participate in political life. At the same time, state and local authorities should ensure respect for diversity, for example through the protection of religious and cultural rights and the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation. At the heart of such a policy is the balance between integration and respect for diversity. It is clear that integration is not a new issue. There is a wide range of experience among OSCE participating States of different policies and measures for promoting integration. Further elaboration of these experiences can assist states seeking to develop their policies by identifying successful practices.

Let me also mention that the OSCE has emphasized the need to:

- consistently and unequivocally speak out against acts and manifestations of hate, particularly in political discourse, and work in favor of tolerance, mutual respect and understanding;

- reject the identification of terrorism and violent extremism with any religion or belief, culture, ethnic group, nationality or race;

- consider developing, in close co-operation with civil society, concrete measures which do not endanger freedom of information and expression, in order to counter xenophobic stereotypes, intolerance and discrimination in the media and to encourage programmes to educate children and youth about prejudice or bias they may encounter in the media or on the internet.

Discrimination and intolerance represent a challenge to democratic societies built upon the principles of respect and equal rights. Where discrimination becomes entrenched or institutionalized, the social and cultural exclusion of groups from participation in 'mainstream' society is often witnessed. OSCE participating States have committed themselves to condemn discrimination against any religious group or individual believer, while ensuring and facilitating the freedom of the individual to profess and practice a religion or belief, alone or in community with others, through transparent and non-discriminatory laws, regulations, practices and policies. In order to promote the participation and integration of members of different cultural, religious, ethnic and other communities, governments must remove barriers. Partnerships and mechanisms for continuous dialogue between the various communities and with governmental authorities are essential.

Additionally, OSCE focused on national institutional mechanisms and practices, including existing specialized bodies and national strategies, to fight discrimination and foster inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic partnerships and dialogue. The activities of international and regional organizations were evaluated in order to contribute to the coherence of actions by the international community in this sphere. The UN Alliance of Civilizations initiative and the OSCE's contribution to it can also be mentioned in this context.

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Now I would like to underline a few personal views.

As I often state, OSCE's three dimensional comprehensive approach to security represents a sound strategy which in recent years has also started to address human security. In that respect, the continued priority attributed to combating discrimination and building on previously adopted norms and values would be instrumental in encountering extremism and tendencies of exclusion, through constituting inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and advancement of mutual understanding, harmony and respect.

Here I will refrain from trying to define what civilization and in that respect what culture means, but suffice to state that they are interdependent and at times overlapping.

However, troubling events of recent years have made it imperative that everybody should engage in a meaningful and operational dialogue. In other words, the need for dialogue among different cultures or value systems continues to appear high on the agenda of the international community. On the other hand, a true dialogue can only be maintained when there is genuine respect and understanding of other cultures, religions and value systems. If mankind is not capable of tolerating and accommodating differences and promoting cultural plurality, then creation of a truly global society will unfortunately remain a dream.

In this connection, we should recall that the history of the relations of the Muslim world with that of the Christian world is a story of large, complicated, intricate and controversial set of relationships, which has also helped to shape the life of diverse cultural attachments.

There are historical and deep rooted perceptions and prejudices on both sides of this divide that can not possibly be characterized as friendly or harmonious. On the other hand, there have also been times that appeared to be constructive in terms of social relationships across religious and cultural boundaries.

However, persistent failure of understanding or even trying to understand each other marks negatively even those relatively stable periods.

Attitudes laid down rigidly in understanding of other cultures, religions and value systems for many centuries seem to continue to shape the moral environment even today. Therefore, the task before us is not easy and paying only lip service to harmony and constructive relationships will not suffice. Unfortunately, there seems to be a set pattern of human relationship which will not be wise to neglect or to gloss over.

Therefore, the challenge is to generate practical and applicable measures to address present misunderstandings, misapprehensions and sources of conflict, be it real or perceived.

I would submit that it would be a big mistake to assume that any one culture or value system is intrinsically more advanced or more suitable to respond to the basic needs of human beings. There is and there can be no hierarchy among cultures, nor is there superiority in the manifestations of human achievements. Rather they are cumulative, interactive and progressive. I believe this should be our starting point.

Respect for human rights, democratic pluralism, rule of law, transparency and accountability are universal values. These values are the product of the collective wisdom, conscience and progress of mankind. As such no single culture can claim the sole ownership of such values.

Although these values are essentially universal, they are not applied universally. Therefore, one of the priority tasks to be undertaken should be to identify the roots of these values within respective cultures and promote their collective ownership. While promoting universally accepted values and internationally established norms, we must also make a

distinction between them and the necessity of preserving distinct and specific local cultural colors that would not be in conflict with the universal values.

On the other hand, it is extremely important not to let the extremists on both ends to divide the mainstream along artificial, ethnic, cultural or religious fault lines. They should be denied such an opportunity by display of a genuinely common and united front. We should aim to facilitate harmony and dialogue by emphasizing the common values of different cultures and religions.

Within this context, we should firmly reject identification of terrorism, radicalism and violence with any particular ethnicity, region, culture or religion.

The real fault line exists not only among ethnicities, regions, cultures or religions, but also between democracy, modernity and progress on the one side and radicalism, authoritarianism and lethargy on the other. In that respect, integration of peoples of diverse backgrounds and different expectations will be crucially important.

Another point that needs to be taken into full consideration is the economic and social inequalities and inequities, including unjust distribution of wealth and power. Most of the time, these can be the causes of extremism. The complexity and fragility of the contemporary human relations in that regard should be fully recognized.

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The call for inter-cultural dialogue is an appeal to those who believe in constructing rather than destroying; to those who embrace diversity as a means of progress and achievement rather than as a threat; and to those who believe in the dignity of the human kind rather than the superiority of some.

To conclude, let me underline that our basic objective must be to find and to put into good use constructive and imaginative solutions to the divisions, misapprehensions and extreme bad feelings between the West and the Muslim world.

Within that context, the main problem emanates from lack of knowledge (of each other), and the negative propaganda perpetrated in the absence of knowing the other side or knowing the other side in the wrong context.

International organizations and parliamentary bodies can play a useful and constructive role within this framework in enhancing tolerance, promoting diversity and respect, and combating discrimination.

Our success will depend to a great extend on our ability to project our messages and objectives to the ordinary people and on our ability to put into good use the projects we will develop together and with the help of the civil society.