

**“PROMOTING INTER-CULTURAL DIALOGUE: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES OF
THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE”**

Lisbon Colloquy, 22 – 24 June 2007

*(Remarks 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 colloquy for inviting me to share my views and OSCE’s perspectives, conceptual basis, priorities and activities on promotion of inter-cultural dialogue.

Within the scope of preparation of the White Paper, Council of Europe has defined inter-cultural dialogue 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.

First a few words on OSCE’s activities and perceptions on this issue might be in order.

In December 2005, the OSCE Foreign Ministers adopted the decision on “*Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding*” whereby they recalled the importance of promoting and facilitating inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and partnerships aimed at tolerance, mutual respect and understanding and freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief at both the national and the international levels. This decision also recalled OSCE’s focus on promoting tolerance and nondiscrimination, embodied in past meetings and conferences in 2003, 2004 and 2005. Through this decision, the OSCE participating States also decided, in implementing their commitments to promote tolerance and non-discrimination, to focus 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 in 2006. Based on discussions throughout the first half of 2006, it was decided to hold the Almati Tolerance Implementation Meeting in June, with the aim of underlining the importance of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic institutions in creating a context for inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic understanding. The Almati Meeting also focused 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. Among the many important actors in this field, this meeting also took into account the valuable role played by women’s organizations and networks in bridging inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic divides.

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.

Although not directly related to inter-cultural dialogue, the recent OSCE Conference held in Bucharest on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding also provided an opportunity to review steps taken and progress achieved on these issues and on commitments underlined at the December 2006 Brussels Ministerial.

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 2005 Ministerial decision on *“Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding”* 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.

The OSCE focused as well on inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic partnerships as a means to promote more positive public and political discourse and to react to negative portrayals of different communities. In the context of respecting free speech, a forward-looking approach was adopted identifying ways in which media, political and civil society leaders can be mobilized to counter negative images and help promote a positive portrayal of the diverse multi-faith and multi-cultural groups that make up today’s pluralistic societies. Forging cross-cultural, religious and ethnic alliances and partnerships between different communities was also encouraged, in order to focus upon the identification of practical policy recommendations and examples of best practices.

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.

The implementation of OSCE commitments by participating States related to fighting discrimination and the promotion of respect and mutual understanding, as well as the role of

OSCE institutions and OSCE field missions in supporting the implementation of these commitments were continued to be evaluated for the development of recommendations to further reinforce the work of the OSCE in fighting intolerance and promoting inter-cultural, religious and ethnic understanding through dialogue and partnership.

Now I would like to underline my 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 all parties 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 will not be capable of tolerating and accommodating differences and promoting cultural plurality, then creation of a truly global society will unfortunately remain a dream.

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 has 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.

As I see it, the call of the Council of Europe 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.

In order to be able to attain, in a realistic time frame, the objectives put forth, I believe the issues faced should be prioritized and put into a conceptual framework. In that respect, the following may deserve further, but not delayed, action and attention:

- a.) Consolidation of international norms adopted by different international organizations into one complete set of rules and if need be strengthening of these norms,
- b.) Review of national legislation in relation to their content dealing with hate speech, discrimination and any discriminatory tendency,
- c.) Effective implementation of existing legislation and training of law enforcement officials,
- d.) Effective education, especially of the youth, to learn and to cherish to live in a culturally diverse community and to respect others,
- e.) Responsible journalism and political discourse,
- f.) Special attention to vulnerable groups and to gender balance,
- g.) Migration/integration in a true sense, leading to cohesive societies,
- h.) Utilization of best practices of other countries/societies,
- i.) Addressing issues in an inclusive manner, in close cooperation and collaboration with the civil society,
- j.) Promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, enhancement of harmonious relations between different segments of the society and fostering respect to "the other".

Since my mandate is specifically related to Islamophobia, a brief explanation on this issue would be appropriate, as it is closely related to inter-cultural dialogue.

International human rights standards and norms call for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and racism. Prohibition of discrimination is also a basic principle of the international law.

However, Muslim communities especially in Western Europe and North America are experiencing an increasingly hostile environment towards them, coupled with discrimination and intolerance in various forms.

This environment, which started to be more pronounced in the post September 11 period, is characterized by suspicion, prejudice, ignorance, negative or patronizing imaging, discrimination including in education, housing and employment, stereotyping all Muslims as "terrorist, violent or otherwise unfit", lack of provision, recognition and respect for Muslims in public institutions, and attacks, abuse, harassment and violence against persons perceived to be Muslim and against their property and prayer places.

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

Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims have devastating effects not only on the daily lives of the Muslim communities, but also on the societies where they live.

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

- a. It should be recognized that religious defamation and for that matter intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is an affront to human dignity.
- b. It should also be recognized that Islamophobia is exceptional among the political ills of the present era: Frequently it is not only the Muslims who are attacked, but also their faith.
- c. All concerned should refrain from making negative generalizations regarding Muslims and also should refrain from stigmatizing them.
- d. Dual aspect of the rise of Islamophobia; on the one hand its intellectual legitimization and on the other hand tolerance shown to this legitimization, should be well recognized and countered.
- e. Reality and seriousness of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims must be accepted. Otherwise this trend will result in the crystallization of cultural and religious differences.
- f. Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims must be dealt with through a sound strategy on three levels:
 - Personal and emotional
 - Intellectual, ideological and media legitimization
 - Political exploitation of Islamophobia
- g. In order to effectively combat intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, condemnation must be accompanied by effective legislative and judicial measures as well as with education.

Conclusion

Our basic objective must be to find and 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, including the OSCE and the Council of Europe, can play a useful and constructive role within this framework in enhancing tolerance and combating

discrimination. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, the examples of good practices of some countries to be made widely available and utilized by other countries might definitely be helpful in eradicating prejudices against Muslims and Muslim communities.

Our success will depend to a great extent 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. The OSCE and the CoE can and should share their experience in building and strengthening the civil society's capacity in combating intolerance and discrimination.

On the other hand, the true and full integration of Muslim migrant communities to the societies where they live will positively contribute to the relationships between the Muslim world and the West. True and full integration will lead to cohesive societies, where the migrants will have a sense of ownership.

Furthermore, the CoE and the OSCE can cooperate and work together in providing integration based on respect to religious and cultural diversity. In that regard, civic and structural integration (political participation) will be important.

Finally, the empowerment of women and gender imbalance is an area prone to conflicts and misconceptions between the West and the Muslim world. The women in the Islamic world need to be more fully empowered to participate in social, economic, cultural and political life.