

Fighting Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: facilitating integration and respecting cultural diversity

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Mr. Chairman,

I would like to thank the introducers for having provided us with a comprehensive and insightful overview of recent trends regarding intolerance and discrimination against Muslims in OSCE participating States. I am pleased that the OSCE has taken the initiative to extensively discuss these serious and complex issues which were grown rapidly and considerably especially in the last few years or so.

Intolerance and discrimination have for long been directly affecting Muslims, particularly those residing in the West, in many aspects of their daily lives tangibly demonstrated in high unemployment, low wages, poor education and working conditions as well as in their cultural libenswelt. In the wake of September 11 tragedy and later on terrorist attack in Madrid and some other violent events in some other places fueled the anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic feelings, behaviors and movements. These incidents have also reinforced suspicions about whether the values of Islam can be reconciled with democracy and whether Muslims can be integrated into the so-called democratic societies.

As a country that has long suffered from terrorism, and lost more than 30.000 of its citizens, Turkey has consistently and unequivocally condemned all acts of terror and continues to actively support international efforts in bringing the perpetrators of terrorist acts before justice. However, the war on terrorism has not only had an important bearing on international politics but has also reflected on the conduct of domestic politics in many countries. In this regard, homeland security has gained primacy in domestic political agendas; and issues related to immigration and integration of Muslim communities was regrettably placed within this context. We all know that many security measures taken in recent years are not taken in light of democratic spirit but in spite of democracy, thus they also had dire consequences for hard-won civil rights and liberties. As a result, in many countries including those which have been the staunchest advocates of these rights, Muslim communities have been particularly affected by certain security measures and legislation. Muslim communities have begun to be perceived in some Western countries as “the enemy within”, posing potential threats to the values of Western civilization. What causes additional concern for us is the recent trend of the intellectual or even moral

legitimization of hostility towards Islam and Muslims, as well as the use of these arguments in mainstream political discourse and the media.

These multidimensional problems and threats, if not addressed, would have a clear bearing on our shared existence and common security. In this vein, it is particularly appropriate that the OSCE with its comprehensive concept of security has included intolerance and discrimination against Muslims on its agenda. As I stated in my speech in the opening session, the Council of Europe did the same in its Third Summit on 16-17 May, 2005. The role of Ambassador Ömür Orhun, as the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, is particularly significant in raising awareness on these issues. We fully support his endeavors. We also call on the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) to pay equal attention to discrimination against Muslims in its programmes and projects on the same footing as other forms of discrimination.

Mr. Chairman,

Having briefly outlined the magnitude of the challenge we face, I would like to offer a few ideas on how we can respond:

Firstly we ought to keep vigil over the present culture of discrimination against Muslims and intolerance towards Islam which has strong historical roots in the Western soil. The amount of feelings, thoughts, evaluations in regard to Islam and Muslims in the media goes far beyond the level of fair description and criticism and incites hatred and animosity in an extremely discriminatory way. Unfortunately, in this destructive work religious fundamentalists, the extreme right wing politicians are not alone. Hatred of Islam and Muslims is not limited to the Western milieu. One can hear similar voices in India or Israel, even in certain sections of the Muslim world.

In brief, let us be brave in identifying this social “disease”.

Secondly, let us not be misled and confused by seemingly clever arguments put forward by certain well-known thinkers and scholars in regard to cultures, religions, etc. Grand narratives may have a powerful appeal but there is little logic and scientific spirit in them.

Thirdly, in order to overcome the myth or even paranoia of clash of civilizations, we should promote that values like human rights, democracy and the rule of law are truly universal and no single culture can claim monopoly over them. Instead, it is crucial to recognize that this heritage incorporates and is enriched by the experience and contributions of all nations, cultures, and religions at different stages of history. Glorious periods of the *Andaluz* contain much evidence regarding the influence and contribution of the Muslim scholars on the European Science and Philosophy. The torch of classical scholarship had been taken up and developed by the Muslim men of learning seven centuries before the Renaissance. The teachings of the Great Cordovan philosophers, Ibn Rushd (known in Europe as Averroes), Ibn Bajja, Ibn Tufail, Ibn Arabi and others proved to lay the foundation stone on which much of the European philosophy science and even mysticism have been built. Islam can truly be said to have played a founding role in Europe’s past. Further research should be carried out on these issues and the results should find their proper place in our education systems and cultures.

Fourthly, a clear and strong political message which rejects the identification of terrorism and extremism with Islam is essential. Islamic world cannot be held accountable because of abhorrent acts of a handful of extremists.

Fifthly, prejudices against and misrepresentations of Muslims should be challenged by highlighting contributions of Muslims to society. Political parties, the media and the honest academia have an important role to play in this field.

Sixthly, like other minorities such as Sikhs or Jews, Muslims should also be protected by specific laws against discrimination. Law enforcement agencies should be trained to identify, investigate and prosecute various forms of hate crimes against Muslims. In some countries, legal protection from discrimination includes race and ethnicity but not religion. This may create gaps in the legal framework.

Finally, alienation and exclusion of Muslim communities should be addressed by clear and consistent integration strategies and action plans which facilitate inclusion and participation of these communities in public life. “Integration policy for the Muslims” could easily be replaced by “integration policy with the Muslims” through recognition of Muslim migrant organizations as dialogue partners.

In light of the foregoing analysis and recommendations, my personal conviction is that political unity and strength is best preserved in a climate of flourishing and self-confident cultural diversities. It is the duty of the Governments to provide the legal framework in which diversity can flourish without jeopardizing the political unity of the states and the nations as well as the status of universally recognized and commonly shared values. Without inclusion with diversity, it is hard to achieve a grass roots “constitutional patriotism” and legitimacy for our political systems.

Last but not least, I find relevance between the debate on Turkey’s accession to the EU and combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. It is healthy also that this debate is not only on Turkey’s accession but more importantly on the European identity. We note with concern, however, that one side of this debate spends so much time and energy while taking religious and cultural issues into account, whereas it pays little attention to the Turkish experience of democracy and to the fact that Turkey is a secular state. It is quite obvious that Turkey’s Islamic identity has not prevented it from having a close interaction with the West and from being an important member of the Western institutions and organizations. The successful completion of Turkey’s EU membership process will signify the harmony and solidarity among European and Muslim societies by coalescing around common, universal and democratic values. Without this positive climate with respect to Islam and the Muslims, intolerance and discrimination will threaten Muslims in general and the Muslim communities living in the West in particular. Therefore, one must be careful that the exclusion of Islam and Muslims from Europe does not become the new political-intellectual identity of Europe.