



**Statement by
OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
First Plenary Session: Intolerance and Discrimination against
Muslims: Old Prejudices and New Targets**

**OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance and
Discrimination against Muslims**

Cordoba, 09 October 2007

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 56 participating States have undertaken strong commitments to fight all forms of discrimination. Among the many tasks given to my Institution, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), in assisting them in the implementation is following manifestations of intolerance against Muslims.

The types of intolerance that Muslims face in the OSCE region are complex and have assumed new forms and expressions in recent years. They include verbal harassment, hate speech and violent attacks as well as distorted representations of Islam and Muslim communities in some media and political discourse. Motivations behind acts of hatred against Muslims range from ignorance to racism and xenophobia to religious intolerance, but are most often a combination of all these factors. In our practical work, it is therefore difficult, if not impossible to draw a clear-cut line between issues of intolerance against Muslim communities and issues related to racism and xenophobia as well as violations of religious freedom. Nor can we address these issues separately.

We also acknowledge that there are many diverse Muslim communities across the OSCE region.

Allow me to highlight some of the findings of a report we published only two weeks ago entitled "Hate Crimes in the OSCE Region: Incidents and Responses". The report includes also an overview of hate-motivated incidents and crimes that Muslims communities faced in 2006 and identifies several key trends.

One trend we found is that anti-Muslim bias was evident in different forms throughout the OSCE region in 2006, including violent physical attacks, verbal harassment and threats of violence. In several cases, attackers targeted persons visibly identifiable as Muslims, including women wearing the *hijab*, imams and worshippers either inside or around mosques.

In our report, we also identify a continuing trend of anti-immigrant sentiment, fuelled by populist rhetoric and biased media portrayals of Muslims as anti-Muslim rhetoric has moved from the far-right of the political spectrum towards the mainstream. We have also seen in many cases that anti-Muslim sentiment in political discourse is also often driven by, and reflective of, anti-immigrant sentiment. The ODIHR will hold a side event today on “Effective Responses to Discriminatory and Biased Portrayals of Muslim Communities in Public Discourse” to discuss this issue in more detail. I invite you all to the event, which will be held in the *Ambrosio de Morales* room at 18:45.

Our Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief has been following developments related to religious freedom of Muslims, including regulations concerning the building of mosques, registration of religious communities, or working conditions of imams, all of which can limit the exercise of religious freedoms of Muslims. At 14:30 today, they will be available to provide more details on their work at our side event on the topic of “religious symbols and the right to freedom of religion or belief”. This meeting will also be held in the *Ambrosio de Morales* room.

Unfortunately, public discourse accompanying the fight against terrorism has in many cases led to associate Muslims and Islam with terrorism, reinforcing stereotypes and contributing to anti-Muslim sentiment. Related to this has been the increased profiling of Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslim) by law enforcement and security personnel. This has included targeted security checks and official calls to introduce passenger profiling based on ethnicity and religion. Such profiling methods, which often target individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs or appearance, can entrench discrimination and exacerbate stereotypes and prejudice against Muslim communities. Other restrictive measures include the increase of regulations in such areas as stop and search, immigration, visa restrictions, and the regulation of religious teaching.

With regard to official data, some states do record hate crimes motivated by racism or anti-Semitism; overall, however, there is a lack of official data on religiously motivated crimes in general, and anti-Muslim hate crimes in particular. The same goes for unofficial data, since few NGOs are involved in monitoring, recording and reporting incidents motivated by anti-Muslim bias. Often, distrust of law enforcement authorities and of the criminal justice system in general, in some cases exacerbated by steps taken in the fight against terrorism, discourage reporting by the communities concerned.

Finally, our report especially highlights responses undertaken by government authorities to combat and publicly condemn acts of hatred against Muslim communities. I hope that States will take this Conference and its follow-up as an opportunity to provide more information in this regard.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Spanish Chairmanship of the OSCE for organising this important event and for their cooperation, giving specific attention to addressing intolerance and non-discrimination against Muslims in the OSCE.

Let me also thank Ambassador Ömür Orhun, for his ongoing work. His role in highlighting issues of key importance, promoting good practices and urging governments to implement their commitments in tackling discrimination against Muslims remains a key element in the OSCE's work in this field. It is a pleasure to cooperate with him.

Let me also thank the Council of Europe, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for their ongoing co-operation and support.

Diversity and dialogue – this relationship, so clearly highlighted by one Chairman-in-Office, remain our joint objective. To bring it to the street, the streets of daily life, is our common challenge of implementation.

My Institution will continue to support OSCE states and civil society organizations in combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Thank you