

COMBATING INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS

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Governmental agencies, cultural and religious communities, public and private organizations, civil society representatives and the media bear a special responsibility for the preservation, continuation and enhancement of constructive, peaceful and forward looking relationship among and between cultures, religions and societies.

In light of the troubling events of the present decade, the need for a true dialogue and interaction among different religions and cultures continue to appear high on the international community's agenda. The existing lack of dialogue and confidence is encouraging the extremists to attempt to divide the international community along artificial cultural and religious fault-lines. This has increasingly become a concern for maintenance of international peace and stability. Therefore, the need for a comprehensive and collective effort to counter this trend has become more crucial than ever.

A true dialogue can only occur when there is genuine respect for and understanding of other cultures and religions. It would be a mistake to assume that any one culture is intrinsically more apt to respond to basic human needs. In fact all cultures are cumulative, interactive and progressive in nature.

As such, values including respect for human rights, democracy, rule of law and accountability are and should be essentially universal. No single culture can claim that these values are theirs alone. Instead, these values are the product of mankind's collective wisdom, conscience and progress. However, such values are not universally applied. The task, therefore, is to identify the roots of these values within our respective cultures and promote their collective ownership.

What needs also to be accomplished is to facilitate harmony, understanding, mutual respect and dialogue, by emphasizing the common values of different cultures and religions.

The globalized world of today with its high level of interdependence requires societies to understand one another in greater depth than ever before. Consequently, employing cross-cultural skills that facilitate mutual understanding among societies has become a condition for peaceful relations. Likewise, societies with multi-cultural experiences are particularly well-placed to contribute to this objective. Their distinct social and historical experiences are conducive to cultivating and articulating cross-cultural skills that would be needed to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts of values. They can assist in avoiding stereotyping, in opposing animosity and in preventing violence and extremism. They can also help to achieve a balance between preserving the cultural identity of all segments of multi-cultural societies.

Within this context, it is a sad fact that the environment in which Muslims now live, especially in Western countries, has deteriorated considerably in the post September 11 period. Muslims, together with some other minority and foreign groups, have been and still are facing intolerance, discrimination, distrust and hostility.

So-called “Islamic terrorism or Islamic extremism” is portrayed as the source of all evil, adding fuel to the already existing prejudice and intolerance against Muslims. People of this moral persuasion are stigmatized because of their beliefs, ethnicities or appearances.

This phenomenon has two additional adverse consequences:

First, it undermines efforts of integration and brings about negative trends in attempts to create an atmosphere of harmony.

Second, an even wider fault line between the Muslim world and the Christian world may emerge.

Therefore, both from a micro-social angle and also from a global perspective it would be wise to put an end to such practices.

OSCE's comprehensive approach to security includes “human security” as an important component. Common values of the OSCE are based on a firm commitment to human rights and on the recognition of the inherent dignity of all human beings.

In that respect, human rights and fundamental freedoms are recognized as essential safeguards of tolerance and non-discrimination, which are indispensable elements of stability, security and cooperation.

However, despite all efforts for the promotion and protection of human rights, acts of racism, xenophobia and discrimination, as well as related intolerance persist in many societies. The resurgence, especially after September 11, of racist tendencies and the emerging Islamophobia challenges the exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms, particularly in some Western countries. In spite of tangible progress achieved in elimination of institutionalized forms of discrimination, OSCE countries still experience new and mounting waves of bias, exclusion and racist violence. These constitute a major threat to friendly and peaceful relations, not only among states but among peoples as well. Hence, the need to struggle with all forms and manifestations of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims has become more urgent and evident than before.

Taking into account that violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as manifestations of hate, discrimination and intolerance threaten stability and security in the OSCE geography, OSCE participating States have undertaken numerous commitments to combat racism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance, including against Muslims. However, much work remains to be done to foster democratic and pluralistic societies, where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity is not only tolerated, but is truly respected and valued.

In that respect, among other related activities, the OSCE also organized tolerance implementation meetings on the topics of inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue, education to promote mutual respect and understanding and hate crime data

collection. During these meetings, good practices in implementation were highlighted and specific recommendations were made concerning areas where strengthened efforts are needed. Furthermore, Ministerial Council Decision on “Combating Intolerance and Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding” tasked the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) to strengthen its early warning function to identify, report and raise awareness on hate motivated incidents and trends and to provide recommendations and assistance to participating States, in areas where more adequate responses are needed.

Just how widespread is the problem of discrimination against Muslims? How frequently are hate crimes committed? Where do they occur, and who are the victims? What steps are being taken by law enforcement agencies and by governments? Answers to such basic questions are needed before anyone can make a serious effort to combat hate in all its manifestations. For that reason, one of the most important parts of the ODIHR’s work in this field is its role as a collection point for relevant information, including statistics from states and police agencies, as well as examples of good practices from a wide variety of sources, including governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Building on these activities, we have to focus on the following areas in the future which will have a bearing on efforts to combat discrimination and intolerance against Muslims:

1. Monitoring, reporting and following up on responses to hate-motivated crimes and incidents
2. Educational activities to promote tolerance, respect and mutual understanding
3. Legislative assistance to collect and assess existing legislation that deals with crimes motivated by hate throughout the OSCE region
4. Civil society capacity building
5. Assistance for law enforcement and judicial officials in combating hate crimes
6. Promoting freedom of religion or belief

Within the scope of the overall fight against discrimination and intolerance, the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE appointed three Personal Representatives at the end of 2004 to promote better coordination of activities related to this endeavor. These positions are part time in nature and honorary. I was honoured to be given the portfolio of Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims. My mandate was extended by the subsequent Chairmanships.

My mandate as the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims envisages promotion of better coordination of participating States' efforts aimed at effective implementation of OSCE decisions in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination, paying special attention to combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

My perception on the implementation of my mandate can be summarized as follows:

- a) The historical, cultural and psychological depth of the issue of discrimination and intolerance always needs to be taken into full consideration.

b) A sound normative framework to combat intolerance and discrimination both in the OSCE and in other international and national fora does exist; what is needed is putting this normative framework into full use and implementation.

c) There is also a need for an intellectual and ethical strategy to avoid political exploitation of the issues related to discrimination and intolerance.

d) Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is not only a matter of discrimination against a specific religious group but also deeply affects international relations as well as the internal stability of Western societies. As such, it is a multifaceted question and must be addressed through a holistic approach.

e) Various forms of intolerance and discrimination need not be subject to an artificial hierarchy. Discrimination is discrimination and must be condemned and dealt with whatever the underlying motive might be. Within this framework, there should be synergy in efforts dealing with different forms of discrimination.

f) On the other hand, the following points must be underlined and given prominence:

i. The quality of life of Muslims living in Western societies must be improved. This will lead to better understanding and better integration, thus to lessening of mutual mistrust.

ii. Muslims should not be seen as second-class citizens, must not be demonized, marginalized, feared or despised.

iii. The war on terror must not become a war on Muslims.

iv. It should be recognized that Muslims have the same basic needs and desires as others, which are material well-being, cultural acceptance and religious freedom without political or social intimidation. In that vein, Muslims should not be marginalized or attempted to be assimilated, but should be accommodated. Accommodation is the best strategy for integration.

Additionally, I try to raise awareness on the necessity of tolerance and non-discrimination; stress the importance of social harmony and respect, especially respect for “the other,” whoever this other may be; search for commonalities rather than divisions and promote inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

Stressing the need for sound legal strategies, a sound legal framework and the implementation of that framework (judicial measures), underlining the need for education, not only of law enforcement officials but especially of the younger generation, highlighting good practices and the role of the media are also among my priorities.

With this understanding, while trying to raise awareness to the phenomena of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims, I conducted country visits to Netherlands, USA, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Spain and Slovenia, upon the invitations extended by the Governments of these countries. During these visits, I met not only high level representatives of the administrations and politicians, but also leaders of relevant institutions and more importantly large segments of the civil society. My activities during these visits, together with my findings, comments and recommendations have been reported to the OSCE

participating States through the Chairmanship. On the other hand, I attended all relevant OSCE events on tolerance and discrimination and elaborated on my views at these meetings.

Furthermore, together with the ODIHR I organized two Muslim NGO Roundtable Meetings, where quite a number of civil society representatives were actively present. The recommendations that emanated from these meetings were compiled in substantial reports. These meetings were also instrumental in helping to create a data base of relevant NGOs, as Muslim NGOs are not that well organized and represented in the international fora.

Additionally, I represented the OSCE at various conferences, work shops and symposia, where I delivered statements elaborating my mandate, activities, perceptions and recommendations.

To keep the OSCE Permanent Council up-to-date on my activities and views, I reported twice every year to this Council both in writing as well as personally, responding also to the comments and questions raised.

All in all, I believe these activities made the OSCE more visible and contributed to a better understanding of the need to combat intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Here let me underline once again that what we need is a positive consciousness on the necessity of a new relationship among all our citizens to attain solidarity through respect for cultural diversity.

We must, as responsible members of our communities, have the wisdom and also the courage to work and to live together. Thereby we can eliminate any clash or any perception of clash among civilizations, cultures or religions.

We must also learn to enjoy our differences, while respecting the others. Differences should not lead to discrimination.

Nations and societies, like individuals, act in their perceived best interest; however, they should understand that bridging the gaps between divergent best interests is the key to common recuperative capacity.

It is a well-established fact that principles of tolerance and non-discrimination lie at the center of the human rights system. These principles are also closely linked to the concept of mutual respect. Mutual respect, on the other hand, is based on equality in dignity as well as equality in benefiting from human rights.

Disregard for tolerance and non-discrimination principles leads to the dismantling of peaceful, secure and stable societies and harms inter-state relations. Democracy and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights, on the other hand, are essential safeguards of tolerance and non-discrimination.

However, more and more people seem to have started to believe that a clash of civilizations is inevitable and that “the others” have to change their values if we are to live together in peace. This attitude threatens the international environment and creates a vicious circle. The widening gap between the parties puts them on a path of confrontation rather than

one of cooperation, while lack of dialogue and collaboration bolsters existing prejudices and thus increases the distance between them.

In this situation, mankind must join forces to resist all attempts to play one culture off against the other, to assert the supremacy of any single culture or religion, or to propagate a “clash of civilizations”. Such ideologies would soon lead to a conflict in which everybody can only lose. And they prevent us from finding joint solutions to the problems facing us all.

Therefore, all the countries of the East and of the West must share a vision of free, tolerant and just societies, where people of different cultural and religious backgrounds live in peace and respect each other.

What can be done to promote tolerance and combat discrimination against Muslims?

- We can and we must speak out swiftly, clearly and forcefully against intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and other vulnerable groups. By doing so, we will be helping to protect our fellow citizens from hate-filled segments of society.

- We can and we must condemn those who discriminate in word or in action.

- Authorities in this respect have a special responsibility to protect their citizens. They must see to it that tolerance and non-discrimination are not in short supply.

- Declaratory statements are of course welcome, but are not enough. We must put into practice what we preach. In other words, we must not only share the same basic values, we must also act in line with this conviction.

In this context, we have to recognize that ethnic and religious identity is but only one element of societal structures and political cultures. On the other hand, the concept of identity is not a static one, but is changeable according to circumstances, as their content or the meaning attributed to them is subject to constant new evaluation and evolution.

In that respect, another factor that needs to be taken into consideration is the ever increasing social mobility. People are moving not only from rural areas to metropolises, but are also from one country to another, mainly to search a better life. This mobility, especially the trans-boundary one brings with it apprehensions by the autochthon peoples of losing their traditional identity in view of increasing number of people representing “alien” cultures, ethnicities and religions. People of divergent backgrounds have to live together (or side by side) and share the same space.

According to reliable surveys, there is a growing tendency to identify oneself with the national and/or religious characteristics of the mainstream. Thus, a competition between the feelings of the mainstream and the expectations of the newcomers becomes inevitable. The newcomers, which are mostly vulnerable minorities, want to stick to their original identificational traits, whereas the majority wants them to become one of them, losing their existing identity. This would amount to assimilation.

On the other hand, we have to recall that intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is not a completely new phenomenon. There are also historical, cultural/religious and psychological reasons behind it.

However, as underlined earlier, in the post-September 11 period, this phenomenon has 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.

Discrimination against Muslims 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. As a hate crime, Islamophobia is also 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.

To summarize the points mentioned so-far, let me say that the range of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is dominated generally by:

- 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.

At this stage, an analysis of the problems encountered by Muslims in the West might be in order.

a) Structural problems:

- Formal relations or lack of such relations between the State and the Muslim communities.
- “Lack of proper knowledge of the language of the country of residence, improper housing, improper or insufficient education, that leads to unequal access to the labor market”, in other words a vicious circle.
- The net result of this situation is a sense of being rejected, stigmatization, marginalization, leading to lack of confidence in the State. (Such people are also more prone to crime and illegal activities, as well as more susceptible to radical propaganda.)

b) Perceptual and behavioral problems:

- prejudice - also against perceived Muslims
- negative sentiments and display of such sentiments
- media coverage - misrepresentation
- political discourse - especially by the far right, but recently by moderates also.

c) Discriminatory practices, including in housing, education and employment, lack of proper places of worship and burial facilities, police practices, and harassment, vandalism and attacks.

At this stage, let me underline what should be done.

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 and a sense of living together.

Another point that deserves utmost importance is education. Especially younger generations 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 for 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 spheres 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 Muslim communities, on the other hand, must shoulder their share of the burden, adopt the civic values of their new societies and distance themselves from radicalism, violence and terrorism. Such an attitude will assist in dispelling misunderstandings, leading to respect for diversity.

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.

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

It has to be acknowledged that there is 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.

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 statements, but be put into practice.

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 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 role to be played and the work to be done by civil society organizations is of utmost importance in lifting these barricades by helping to initiate a sound dialogue.