

**DEALING WITH INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION
AGAINST MUSLIMS :
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SOLUTIONS**

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I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the Union of NGO's of the Islamic World for organizing this important and timely conference.

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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 intolerance, discrimination and hate in all its manifestations. For that reason, a most important part of our work must be to collect relevant information that will facilitate focusing on areas which will have a bearing on efforts to combat intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

The collection and analysis of such information will also assist in identifying the gaps in implementation of national and international commitments related to tolerance and non-discrimination.

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As I am the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims and as my mandate envisages promotion of better coordination of efforts aimed at effective implementation of OSCE decisions in the field of combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, I would first of all like to explain my perception on the implementation of this mandate.

a) First of all, the historical, cultural and psychological depth of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims always needs to be taken into full consideration.

b) Secondly, a sound normative framework to combat intolerance and discrimination both in the international and in some national fora does exist; what is needed is putting this normative framework into full use and implementation, and strengthening it where needed.

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

d) Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is not only a matter of ill treatment 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) 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, alienated, 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 stigmatized or attempted to be assimilated, but should be accommodated. Accommodation is the best strategy for integration.

Additionally, we must 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.

Furthermore, 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 should also be among our priorities.

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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 connection, let me underline 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.

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The term “Islamophobia” needs, but lacks a commonly agreed definition. It has often been defined as “fear or suspicion of Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them”. I think this is a rather narrow context. I prefer to use the term “intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and Islam”.

Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, or if you like Islamophobia, is not a new phenomenon. There are historical, cultural/religious and psychological reasons behind it.

However, 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.

“Islamophobia” is a distinct and 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.

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) The first category consists of structural problems, including lack of formal relations between the State and the Muslim communities, and poor housing, inadequate education and unequal access to proper employment.

The net result of this situation is a sense of stigmatization, feelings of being rejected and 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) The second group are perceptual and behavioural problems, including prejudice; negative sentiments and display of such sentiments; negative media coverage and misrepresentation; and adverse political discourse, especially by the far right, but recently by moderates also.

c) The third category of problems consists of discriminatory practices as such.

- The first point to be mentioned in this connection is that there exists no or insufficient reliable monitoring.
- As I mentioned before, housing and employment are two major areas where discrimination occurs.
- Lack of proper places of worship and burial facilities is among the major impediments faced.
- Police practices, including search and arrest; customs entry procedures, etc. is still another problem area.
- Finally, harassment, vandalism and physical attacks only because he/she is a Muslim or perceived as such is a source of great concern.

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Let me now try to underline what should be done.

First of all, the Western European and Northern 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, be role models 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, seek not only rights but also meet their obligations 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 our societies.

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