



French contribution to the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding

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Speech by Laurent Stéfanini,

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"National initiatives to promote inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and civil society partnerships"

On behalf of France and as Religious Affairs Adviser to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, I would like to give a short speech on the topic on this morning's agenda, namely Islam in France and how the Muslim religion has been taken into consideration nationally by the public authorities these past years. This process has lasted more than fifteen years and taken place in two stages.

It is a known fact that the largest community of Muslim origin or tradition in Western Europe resides in France and numbers about 4.5 million people. Half of them are French and the other half foreign citizens. It is not the only immigrant community in France, the leading communities – accounting for about half of all immigrants – still being European, namely Portuguese, Polish, British, and Ukrainian. Nor is it a new community of immigrants: France has always been a country of immigration, and a big flow of immigrants from North Africa has been observed since the late forties of the 20th century.

But the specificity of that immigration with a Muslim culture led to the commitment of public authorities from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Two stages can be defined:

– The first one, from 1990 to 2003, led to the creation of electoral bodies for French Muslims: the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) and the Regional Councils of the Muslim Faith (CRCM). Following a ten-year consultation with the different groupings within

the Muslim faith, a declaration called "Principles and legal foundations governing relations between public authorities and Muslim religious authorities in France" was adopted on 28 January 2000 by the French Minister of the Interior, who is responsible for religious affairs in France, and 18 French federations and leading mosques (almost all of them except Salafist ones). An English version of this declaration, negotiated and approved jointly by all parties, is available in the lobby. Please take a copy. It is important to understand what was achieved by common accord. Three more years of joint work and a change of political majority in the year 2002 led to the creation of the above councils on 13 April 2003, namely the national Council (CFCM) and 25 local ones (CRCM) at regional level. These councils are elected by the 1,600 Muslim places of worship in France. They operate effectively, were elected for the first time in April 2003 and re-elected in June 2005. As you will see, they address all issues: mosques and places of worship, ministers of religion and other religious officials, Muslim chaplaincies (in prisons and the army), private teaching institutions, dress and eating requirements, burial grounds, and religious feasts.

– This consultation work proved insufficient, however, and the following anti-discrimination measures had to be implemented as from 2003:

– Law 2003-88 of 3 February 2003 establishing harsher penalties for racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic offences. This law was framed to combat anti-Semitism, but is applicable as well to discrimination against Muslims. It has proved successful and courts have been asked to be especially vigilant about these cases of discrimination;

– Creation of a High Authority to Fight Discrimination and to Promote Equality (HALDE). It was established a little over a year ago and has already investigated thousands of individual cases, especially in the field of housing and employment;

– Creation of a new ministerial office attached to the Prime Minister and headed by the Minister Delegate for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities, responsible also for promoting affirmative action in education, the media and, in particular, in the suburbs of big cities where it is difficult to be successful if you are a migrant with a Muslim culture.

All these measures are beginning to bear fruit, helping Muslim communities find their place inside French society, while enshrining equal civil rights for all our fellow French citizens in the framework of what the French call "republican values".

Thank you.