

**OSCE Chairmanship Conference  
On Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims,  
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ENGLISH only

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

We are not experiencing a phenomenon of Islamophobia in Switzerland. What we have is fear, instrumentalized by some political forces. And fear can be dangerous.

Fear by whom and of what?

Fear on the two sides, the Muslim minority and the majority of the Swiss population. On the side of the Muslim community there is the fear that they are being unfairly targeted for the actions of a minority of terrorists. They believe they are being lumped together in one basket called the Muslim minority without any recognition of their ethnic or cultural diversity. They realize that before the 9/11 terrorists attack, people used to address them as Turks, Bosnians, or Arabs, but thereafter they became overnight Muslims. They are being asked to talk as Muslims despite the fact they know, just as you do, that identity is more complex than to be reduced to one's religious beliefs. And the more they are treated as Muslims, the more some of them start to perceive themselves as such!

Their fear is very specific; it is of being demonized, humiliated, and constantly perceived as a "potential threat". Some few even go further and say: "we are afraid that our religion is being specifically targeted, as a means to *destroy* it. This is a crusade that is taking shape."

You do not know how many times I have heard this sentence.

Look at the other side of the spectrum, to the majority of Swiss population, and you also see fear: fear of three dimensions.

Fear of the accelerated demographic change that is taking place in their society. Switzerland can be proud of the fact that 20% of its population is made of immigrants. In every decade or so, it has witnessed the migration of a different ethnic group. And each ethnic group faced difficulties at the beginning of its stay. Hence, Italians, who came during the economic boom of the sixties, were faced in 1969 with an initiative, the famous Schwarzenbach-Initiative, which was introduced to limit their numbers constitutionally. Today they are considered an integral part of the Swiss society. In the eighties the Tamil group, who came in large numbers fleeing the civil war in their country, were called by some newspapers "the heroine addicts' Tamil". Today they are perceived as the model immigrants. In the nineties, refugees fleeing the horror of the Bosnian and Herzegovina's war, and later Kosovoan refugees, sought safety in Switzerland. At that time, nobody called them Muslims. Today, it is this group with other ethnic groups, which is being targeted by the Minaret initiative.

Society is changing in a breath taking pace. This change involves its very fabric, its face, colour, and shape. Who would not be afraid?

Another dimension of the fear of the Swiss majority involves the fear of Islamic extremism - a legitimate fear. "Can I trust you?" This in a nutshell is the message I get in my encounters with many Swiss people. An old man once told me: "I do not have a problem with Muslims praying in a mosque;

I am just not sure which Islam is being preached in this mosque". 9/11 was a watershed in many ways. It changed our lives destroying the rather naive feeling that "we are safe". Not any more.

Many people feel they are facing a new threat, a kind of danger which they do not comprehend. Terrorists who are determined to destroy their sense of safety at any price. The threat is intertwined tightly with extremists claiming to speak in the name of Islam, and the fact that this religion was treated any way with mistrust and suspicion before the attacks did not really help much.

The third and last dimension of the majority's fear is the most important. It has little to do with Islam itself, and more to do with patriarchal structures prevalent in some segment of ethnic minorities. It pertains to certain social values and norms that some feel are being imposed on their societies. Important values to Swiss society, such as gender equality, which women fought hard to win, are perceived as being specifically targeted and threatened. People are afraid that their society is changing in a manner that they do not approve nor appreciate.

Fear! Fear on both sides. And fear just like weakness breeds evil. For it is irrational. It is on this irrationality of fear that extremists on both sides of the spectrum are counting on to further their political agendas. The question therefore is how to counter this fear? The word dialogue has been repeated constantly in the last several years. Yet if you conduct a dialogue with out using direct and honest language that addresses the roots of these fears, you end up being "*nice and frustrated*".

A plan of action is needed. A plan that accepts the Universal declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women as the basis of our conduct in this changing societies; a plan that starts with the youths, targeting them with specific programs, instilling in them the belief that they are indeed part of this society, not foreigners who should be deported; programs that aim to provide them with the best education possible, following that with measures to integrate them economically; we need a plan of action that introduces projects against extremism, on both sides, designed to highlight the diversity of Islamic traditions and the concept that we could be different but equal. Finally, we need a plan of action that is based on the principle of respect. For just as I know that I have to adapt and respect the norms of my new homeland, I expect you to start with yourself as well, and learn how to integrate with me in this changing society.

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