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At the request of Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, please find attached for your information his remarks at a Meeting on Antisemitism and Islamophobia organized by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Mannheim on 15 March 2007.

INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIM

Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

(Meeting organized by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Mannheim, 15 March 2007, on Antisemitism and Islamophobia)

Introduction

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation to the organizers of this meeting. If I am not mistaken, this gathering is a first of its kind, in that both Antisemitism and Islamophobia are being addressed at the same time.

It might be argued that there is an inherent relationship between Antisemitism and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. It is a sad but true fact that our societies have experienced a dramatic increase in discriminatory and intolerant practices and incidents against Jews and Muslims recently. The common denominator of both is that they constitute an affront to human dignity.

At this point I would like to refer to ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No.8 on combating racism while fighting terrorism, which states that "as a result of the fight against terrorism engaged since the events of 11 September 2001, certain groups of persons, notably Arabs, Jews, Muslims, certain asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, certain visible minorities and persons perceived as belonging to such groups, have become particularly vulnerable to racism and/or to racial discrimination across many fields of public life, including education, employment, housing, access to goods and services, access to public places and freedom of movement". What I will have to say about Muslims, therefore, will be applicable to a great extent for other vulnerable groups, including the Jews.

Within my mandate as the Personal Representative of Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, I observe that almost all Muslim communities in Western Europe and North America are experiencing an increasingly hostile environment towards them. The 2004 Report of the International Helsinki Federation on "Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in the EU" and the 2006 Report of the EUMC on "Muslims in the European Union – Discrimination and Islamophobia" are two very important sources that clearly demonstrate this phenomenon.

This hostile environment, which started to be more pronounced in the post September 11 period, is characterized by suspicion and prejudice, at times going back to history; ignorance; negative or patronizing imaging; discrimination and stereotyping all Muslims or Islam in general as "terrorist, violent or otherwise unfit"; lack of provision, recognition and respect for Muslims in public institutions; and attacks, abuse, harassment and violence directed against persons perceived to be Muslim and against mosques, Muslim property and cemeteries.

Although I do not like the term, this is Islamophobia, which can also be defined in short as "fear or suspicion of Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them".

Islamophobia has existed for a very long time, albeit in a rather subdued form, and is deeply rooted in prejudice. However, it became a topical issue recently, with devastating effects not only on the lives of the Muslim communities, but also on the societies where they live.

Islamophobia, whether in the shape of intolerance and discrimination, or whether in the form of violence, is a violation of human rights and is a threat to social and political cohesion.

All major international human rights organizations has recognized that negative connotations of Islamophobia may lead to exclusion and self-exclusion of especially younger generations, with obvious negative results in terms of self-esteem and social integration. It is also acknowledged that, persistent forms of Islamophobia and in particular its repercussions through the mass media represent a threat to peace, stability and democracy.

To remedy this negative and disturbing phenomenon, sound strategies and educational approaches must be developed and vigorously implemented. Increasing understanding and respect for religious diversity would be the first step in identifying and developing criteria for good practices in combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Impact of the Far Right and the Media

It is obvious that current trends of racist discourse and the cynical media approach play a critical role in creating a hostile climate towards Muslims.

In most occasions, racist views have greater impact than the weight of the support behind them. They also cause moderate and mainstream political groups and parties to harden their stance towards ‘the other within’, namely the immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, minorities and in our case Muslims.

The populist nationalist discourse adopted by far right political groups unfortunately started to attract more interest from the mainstream communities which feels insecure because of the changing social and economic environment around them. Disinformation about ‘the other’ produced by such radical political groups leads to the adoption of a negative and prejudiced approach by ordinary people who already lack reliable and non-biased information about those people. Therefore, reasonable politicians should play an active role in strengthening more moderate approaches.

The attitude of media in its coverage also fuels the resentment in all sides.

In many parts of Europe, the media is often overly subjective, one-sided and clichéd when it comes to reporting on Muslim communities. Muslims feel overwhelmingly discriminated against as a result of news stories which anchor a negative image of their culture in the public consciousness. For instance, isolated and unfortunate incidents receive disproportional media coverage and this situation provides the impression that those practices are ubiquitous within Islamic culture.

Unbalanced reporting also reinforces stereotypes, and provides readers and audiences with the impression that the entire Muslim community is prone to violence, abusive towards women, rigid and monolithic.

Particularly for Germany, the media also echoes political discourse which insists that Germany is not a country of immigration, that migrants are not citizens, and which constructs Muslims as the cultural 'other'. For instance, reference to minority groups living in Germany – people who have been living in Germany for decades, or those who are second or third generation – routinely in the media as migrants or 'guests' (Auslander) perpetuates a sense of exclusion of Muslims from the civic and socio-cultural structures of the country.

Therefore, I would like to recommend that the media must promote ethical reporting and journalistic standards, which prevent the deliberate stereotyping and caricaturing of Muslim communities. Similarly, the media should be encouraged to avoid using isolated and individual negative events to tar the whole community.

In that respect, the media should adopt a more balanced coverage of Muslim communities, and present stories that feature 'everyday' activities of Muslims and the 'ordinary' face of Muslim citizens. Role models and positive examples within the Muslim community should also be featured in media broadcasting instead of the current zeroing in on negative events/acts.

The politicians, as well, on their part, should be careful and constructive in their discourse related to Islam in general and the Muslim communities living in Germany in particular, trying not to alienate or stigmatize them.

The Role of Education and School Curriculum

Younger generations constitute the majority of the Muslim communities in Western Europe and Northern America. Therefore, we need to emphasize the role that should be played by sound education and appropriate curriculum.

Although only a tiny minority is involved with extremist groups, most of the ordinary young people are becoming more and more alienated from the societies in which they live. Thus the causes of alienation of the Muslim youth and the ways to prevent radicalization needs to be analyzed carefully.

A holistic approach is a must both to overcome alienation and prevent radicalization. Improved education and school curriculum need to be seen as the crucial part of such a holistic approach.

Education and training, both for the mainstream communities and for Muslim and migrant populations are the key in solving many problems:

- a) In this context, I need to mention the necessity of civic education, addressing issues of identity and fostering respect for diversity, also teaching Muslims of their rights.
- b) Cross-cultural education or history of humanity (inclusive education about the world and its peoples) is another area that deserves more attention.
- c) Media literacy training, exposure to electronic media.
- d) Mother tongue education for migrants.

e) Religious education, also for diverse religious beliefs.

f) Professional education, to expand opportunities; apprenticeship and training for employment.

g) Training for teachers, Imams and for law enforcement officials.

On the other hand, mainstream communities need to know Islam in general terms, to give them a sense of respect, tolerance and co-existence. (Cohesive societies) Furthermore, governments or the civil society should not insist on creating an artificial “European Islam”, but should try to promote the well-being of Muslims of Europe.

What else 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. In that respect, I welcome the convening of an Islamic Summit by the German Government and hope that it will produce useful and concrete results.

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. (In other words, a sense of living together should be promoted.)

Finally, I would like to say a few words on 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 parts 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 and democratic values of their new societies and distance themselves from radicalism and terrorism.

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 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.