



Tolerance, non-discrimination and harmony

Saturday, June 4, 2005

Part I

Ambassador Ömür ORHUN*

Our present environment

The world we are living in is essentially different from the world we left behind in the 20th century. Not only the international system but also people's concepts, attitudes and expectations are changing.

Future developments in that regard will depend on the choices we make and on the path we follow. A reappraisal of how best to pursue our common vision and collective interests is called for now more than ever.

The 1990s were characterized by a sense of optimism fueled by the spread of democracy, the market economy and human rights and freedoms. However, we tended to forget that our globe is a complex one and is also vulnerable in view of unforeseen developments. In fact, the attacks on September 11 brutally demonstrated to what extent extreme and violent groups could succeed in challenging the values of the civilized world. Aside from the dramatic impact of this event on international relations and on transatlantic links, its negative consequences, related to the emergence of a climate of fear, suspicion and unrest, leading to manifestations of discrimination and racism, must be thoroughly considered.

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 subjected to 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. A recent report of the International Helsinki Federation is an eye-opener in this respect.

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 stop such discrimination.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

The OSCE brings together 55 countries in the Euro-Atlantic-Asian area and, as such, is the largest regional international organization. The 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 related to racism, xenophobia and discrimination as well as related intolerance persist in many societies. The resurgence, especially after September 11, of racist tendencies and, as underlined earlier, 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 against all forms and manifestations of discrimination and intolerance has become more urgent and evident than before.

Recognizing this necessity and in line with its comprehensive concept of security, the OSCE has recently initiated a series of activities to promote tolerance and non-discrimination and has also undertaken the organization of major international conferences for the same purpose. Within the scope of the overall fight against discrimination and for promoting tolerance, the chairman-in-office of the OSCE also appointed three personal representatives at the end of 2004 to promote better coordination of activities related to this endeavor.

Personal representative

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) 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.

On the other hand, I will 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 will also be among my priorities.

In conclusion, 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.

* Former permanent representative of Turkey to the OSCE, Ambassador Ömür Orhun is presently the personal representative of the chairman-in-office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims, a recently established, part-time, honorary position.



Tolerance, non-discrimination and harmony - II

Sunday, June 5, 2005

Ambassador Ömür ORHUN*

A conceptual approach to tolerance and non-discrimination:

Today, we all seem to agree that democracy is the best form of government. Fundamental and indispensable elements of democracy are worth remembering:

- Tolerance for differences and freedom of expression of thought and belief, which are the basis of creativity and development;
- Participation, which bolsters the awareness of common responsibility;
- Solidarity, which is the complementary element of civic identity;
- And finally transparency, which enables togetherness in solving problems without ignoring differences of opinion.

We must 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.

Nowadays we also witness increasing demands to enhance action against racism, xenophobia, discrimination and related intolerance. Many international organizations, NGOs and also governments are paying particular attention to the question of tolerance and non-discrimination. These efforts are welcome, but as long as the sickness is not completely cured, they are bound to remain either ineffective or temporarily effective.

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.

What can be done to promote tolerance and combat discrimination?

- We can and we must speak out swiftly, clearly and forcefully against intolerance and discrimination. 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

Harmony and respect:

As the 2002 OIC-EU Forum held in Istanbul acknowledged, history has shown that lack of knowledge and mutual respect among civilizations and cultures greatly affects world stability and peace. On the other hand, harmony and welfare are nurtured when different peoples make communication a priority, taking the time to express and listen to each other's views and interests, acknowledging and tolerating differences while at the same time seeking out commonalities that can help build strong relationships that promote cooperation.

The tragic events of September 11 and their repercussions have shown once again the need to strengthen tolerance and understanding among different cultures to avoid the reappearance of deeply rooted prejudices. Acts of terrorism cannot be explained or justified for political, religious, cultural or any other reason. On the other hand, there is now a growing consciousness of the need for all sides to discuss and to attempt to better understand the differences in perceptions, values and interests as well as to promote tolerance and appreciation for cultural diversity.

In our deliberations to protect and to improve the shared values of different cultures and to enhance tolerance, dialogue and cooperation within and among nations and peoples, it might be useful to remember the conclusions of the OIC-EU Forum:

- "Cultures, in their diversity, complement and enhance one another. We must, therefore, confirm our conviction on the necessity of harmony among cultures and civilizations and attainability of this harmony.
- The main means to support coherence and solidarity and to avoid racial, religious and cultural prejudices is to enhance our knowledge of one another through communication and cooperation for the promotion of common universal values, such as those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant international human rights instruments. To this end all political entities have a joint responsibility to contribute to the achievement of these goals.
- We must reaffirm that terrorism cannot be justified for any reason whatsoever. Also, we must recognize the joint responsibility to fight terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.
- We must be committed to defining problems emerging from cultural prejudices and political and economic injustices and to promoting solutions that will contribute to universal peace, welfare and stability.
- We must accept the need for further cooperation. For that, existing frameworks, both bilateral and also multilateral, must continue to be utilized."

OSCE Cordoba Conference:

The OSCE, within the scope of its activities to promote tolerance and non-discrimination and as a follow-up to the 2004 Berlin and Brussels conferences, will be organizing a major international Conference on Tolerance in Cordoba, Spain, on June 8 and 9, 2005. At that conference, the status of implementation of previously adopted OSCE decisions in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination; raising awareness on the necessity of combating intolerance and discrimination; the role of the media; the role of education; dealing with hate-motivated crimes; data collection in that respect; good practices of not only governments but also of civil society; cooperation between authorities and nongovernmental organizations; combating and countering prejudices; promoting integration and respect for diversity; and

the importance of dialogue will be among the key topics to be addressed. It is expected that the OSCE Cordoba Conference will end with the announcement of a declaration, which will be a forward-looking document in promoting and enhancing tolerance.

One of the key sessions of the Cordoba Conference will be devoted to fighting intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and to facilitating integration and respecting cultural diversity. Ways in which the media can challenge prejudices; representation of Muslims in public roles; strategies for tackling social/political exclusion; and highlighting positive contribution of Muslims to society will be among the issues to be discussed at this session.

Cordoba, a city where three religions – Islam, Christianity and Judaism -- could live together peacefully in the past is a most appropriate place to hold a conference on tolerance, non-discrimination, respect and harmony. The plaque on the Mezquita Mosque in Cordoba rightly states that the light which shines from this mosque proposes the mutual fellowship of the communities of the world.

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