

**Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the
OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination
against Muslims, at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
(Warsaw, 29 September 2005)**

WORKING SESSION ON TOLERANCE AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

Introduction

It is indeed a pleasure for me to address this session on the specifically selected topic of “Tolerance and Non-Discrimination” of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

Our objective today is to evaluate the implementation of existing commitments in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination, as well as to raise awareness about multiple and cross-dimensional forms of discrimination in the OSCE region.

I will try, within the scope of my mandate, to dwell mainly on the importance of monitoring hate crimes and other incidents of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. I will also touch upon problems related to the full integration of Muslims to the societies they are living in Western Europe and Northern America and to the necessity of preventing backlash against them following terrorist attacks, including the promotion of effective political leadership and responsible media reporting on this issue.

But first allow me to share with you some general considerations.

Our world is undergoing a rapid change. While becoming more interdependent, paradoxically we are also becoming more uncertain. Globalization is opening up vast new opportunities, but is also causing insecurity. Non-conventional and asymmetrical threats are menacing human life and our civilization. Within this general environment, we are also sadly witnessing increasingly violent manifestations of intolerance and discrimination against vulnerable groups, including the Muslims.

In short, we are tested with new experiences. In this endeavour, the ultimate direction manifested by our common sense and realism must point out to a strong sense of solidarity and togetherness. The multi-dimensional character of the new global environment compels us to adopt a more comprehensive and cooperative attitude.

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As I underlined earlier, despite all efforts for the protection and promotion of human rights, acts related to racism, xenophobia and discrimination, as well as related intolerance persist in many societies.

The resurgence of Islamophobia, especially after September 11, coupled with related racist tendencies challenge the exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms of Muslims particularly in Western countries. In spite of tangible progress in elimination of institutionalized and structured forms of discrimination, many OSCE countries still experience new and mounting waves of bias, exclusion and violence against Muslim groups and peoples.

OSCE, within its comprehensive concept of security, has also recognized the need to struggle against all forms and manifestations of discrimination and intolerance, and has significantly strengthened its profile in this respect.

As we all know, our present political agenda is very much dominated by the necessity to ensure peaceful coexistence between different ethnic, racial and religious groups. As such,

OSCE's operational instruments have been geared towards reducing and eventually eliminating discrimination as a source of tension and promoting tolerance. In that respect, starting with mid-2002 the OSCE organized a range of high level meetings and adopted various decisions focusing on specific areas, such as data collection, law enforcement, education and raising public awareness. These activities and decisions were also considered as important contributions to combating terrorism.

The decisions taken by the political organs of the OSCE foresees increased tasks for the participating States and for the ODIHR. These tasks include compiling statistics and information on hate crimes, monitoring and reporting such crimes, revising legislation in case of necessity and fully implementing legislation, and promoting best practices and disseminating lessons learned.

On the other hand, within the scope of overall fight against discrimination and promoting tolerance, the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE appointed three personal representatives at the end of 2004 to promote better coordination of the efforts of participating States aimed at effective implementation of previously adopted norms and decisions in the field of combating discrimination and promoting tolerance.

Conceptualization of Hate Crimes

The term hate crime has become part of our everyday vernacular. But what is a hate crime? Why hate crimes and especially the violent ones have proliferated? What are the issues facing legislators, law enforcement officials and the general public? What role for the media?

Hate crime is commonly defined as any of various crimes and/or violent acts against people, property or organizations because of the group to which they belong or identify with, motivated by hostility to such groups based on religion, creed, color, gender, ethnicity, language, race, national or social origin and the like.

Current legislation of the OSCE countries allows prosecution of hate crimes in differing modes. But what is important and that needs underlining is that hate crimes are message crimes. The offender aims to send a message to members of a certain group that they are not welcome and that they are despised. As such, hate crimes have also serious psychological effects.

The main determinant of hate crime is prejudice, blinding the aggressors to immorality. Such prejudice is usually rooted in an environment that disdains someone who is "different" or sees that difference as threatening. Hence the need to promote respect to "the other", whoever this other might be.

Integration:

As the Director of the ODIHR Ambassador Strohal stated at the 2005 ODIHR Seminar on Integration, a cohesive society relies on more than just equal opportunities for all. It relies on social conditions that enable people from all backgrounds to feel and to be included in society and to share an identity.

Such will be true integration. Therefore, the main task of the political leaders and the civil society in communities where large Muslim groups live is to help dismantle the barriers that prevent Muslims from contributing fully to these communities. This should be at the heart of integration agendas.

Let me emphasize here that I am not suggesting that the Muslims should cease to be what they are and adopt some other identity. Integration is a two way street and in this process all involved are to contribute.

Speaking about integration, we should recognize the limitations of both assimilationist and multiculturalist policies. In our advanced modern world, even the notion of “assimilation” smacks of totalitarianism. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, and if carried to its extreme, may amount to imprisoning migrants in cultural ghettos. Some countries have defined freedom as the right (for migrants) to live in exactly the way they choose, in an enclave of their own. This will lead to segregated societies. To separate communities in this way may offer the illusion of a multicultural paradise, but in actual life it brings about inequality, incomprehension, fear and even hostility. On the other hand, migrants should not be held responsible for problems over which they have no control or for acts that they have not taken part.

There are quite diverse forms of integration. Without going into their details, we may enumerate them as follows: cultural and behavioural; structural; civic; marital; identificational; and attitudinal. I believe structural and civic integration is the most sound of all. In the post September 11 period, the task of encouraging economic, social and cultural integration of Muslim groups is becoming more urgent. As recent events show, the price of getting this done in a wrong way will be detrimental.

Islamophobia

Almost all Muslim communities in Western Europe and North America are experiencing an increasingly hostile environment towards them. This 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 including in housing and employment; 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 person perceived to be Muslim and against mosques, Muslim property and cemeteries.

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 since 2001, 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. It is obvious that Islamophobia is seen in countries where Islam is not observed by the majority of the population.

Council of Europe 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 to identifying and developing criteria for good practices in combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Conclusions

We may not have all the answers to all the problems we face. This should not lead us to doing nothing. We have to start somewhere.

The first thing we must do should be reaching out across the barricades that exist or that some want to place between the Muslim communities and the rest.

We should avoid being at the wrong end of racism and Islamophobia. We should recognize that even cruel words and dismissive gestures are instrumental in creating barricades of prejudice.

Secondly, as the Secretary General of the United Nations Mr. Kofi Annan stated, we must “unlearn intolerance.” No one can or should be neutral in the fight against intolerance and discrimination.

Thirdly, we must accept the importance of compliance with already agreed norms and decisions in combating intolerance and discrimination. A culture of compliance should be created, as opposed to a culture of non-responsiveness.

We must combat with intolerance and discrimination not only with words, but also with acts of justice, campaigns of integration, harmony and respect for “the other” and with adequate resources. In this endeavour, the light of knowledge must be our source of inspiration; not the darkness of hatred. We must forget everything we memorized concerning hatred and enmity.