

ADDRESS BY PROF.DR.NEVZAT YALÇINTAŞ
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IN THE OSCE CONFERENCE ON ANTI-SEMITISM AND ON OTHER FORMS
OF INTOLERANCE
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ENGLISH only

Dear Colleagues,

It is an honor for me as Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE to address such an important conference on anti-Semitism and on other forms of Intolerance. I also warmly thank the Spanish hosts for the excellent arrangements in organising this Meeting and for welcoming all of us to this historic and important city.

In today's World racism, xenophobia, religious and ethnic fanaticism, anti-Semitism and prejudicial attitudes against tenants of certain creeds especially against Muslim, continue to be challenges, we have to face.

All individuals, governments, nations and international bodies have a responsibility in confronting them. Every effort to create the political, social and economic basis eradicating and discouraging contradictions is most valuable. Similar efforts creating the cultural atmosphere encouraging and nourishing understanding are equally valuable.

Terrorism cannot be disregarded in any way. It has unfortunately had a negative impact on the image of the Islamic world. This important issues which needs to be well addressed, puts responsibility on both sides.

Recently, the international interest in the Islamic world has increased throughout the entire world. However, in many cases the point of departure for this interest derives rather from the negative considerations or perceptions regarding the Islamic world. I sincerely believe that this international interest should be turned into an opportunity, so as to better present Islam and the Islamic community to the world at large.

In order to paint a more accurate picture of Islam and Muslim, we should contribute to them as equal intellectual partners. The higher the scientific and philosophical level and the representative quality of contributions emanating from within Islam, the more their chances will be to influence the debate around the world. It is, therefore, of great importance that based on the fundamental principles of the Islamic tradition, such as tolerance and moderation, an open-minded, realistic but equally visionary approach should be taken.

Distinguished participants,

Turkey is proud of its exceptional tradition of religious tolerance which was one of the most noteworthy attributes of Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire was one of the largest empires in world history covering most of Mediterranean basin region extending from North Africa to Eastern Europe. It has been suggested that one of the characteristics that extended the domination of the Ottoman Empire was its allowance of religious

freedom for the different nationalities and minorities under its rule. Since 1492 through five centuries, the Ottoman Sultans and then Turkish Republic, welcomed the Jews and offered them a safe heaven from persecution in the European countries. While many European nations expelled, persecuted or tried to convert the Jews under their dominion, the Turkish people of the Ottoman Empire, remained as an outstanding example of tolerance of different nationalities with different religions. Christians, Jews and Muslims coexisted for hundreds of years under its umbrella.

In the meantime for Ottoman Empire tolerance was predicted on the notion of the acceptance of difference. Ottomans did not attempt to homogenize communities, as does the modern nation-state.

People of Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe did experience in their history times of peace, harmony and prosperity.

In our times, from European Union countries to the United States, periods and spaces of co-habitation of people of different religions cultures or colors do exist.

However, the roots, seeds and practices of prejudice and intolerance are also still everywhere.

Sometimes greed and selfishness, sometimes ignorance, illiteracy and dogmatism incite these feelings of religious-ethnic prejudice or exclusion. Consequently they show up as extremist ideologies, irresponsible leaderships or abusive policies.

At this point, I should express my deep concern for the surge of hostilities, violence and terror all around the world. My concern is that every casualty, loss of every innocent life will deepen the negative feelings among nations.

I fully agree that each society has the right to function benefiting also from its own culture, values and traditions. Yet, this cultural relativism should not be used as an excuse for ignoring the existence and merits of universal values, let alone their abuses. Values like human rights, democracy and rule of law are truly universal. No single culture can claim that universal values belong to it alone.

This heritage includes the experiences and contributions of all nations and religions at different stages of history and at different geographies. This is an incredibly important point to recognize now. The dialogue among us is our best hope to jointly reinforce these universal values. We can thus build a peaceful, sustainable and just future thereupon.

Distinguished Guests,

A true dialogue can only occur when there is genuine respect for and understanding of other cultures and civilizations. Indeed, if mankind is not capable of tolerating and accommodating cultural differences and plurality, there will be no room for a global society.

Thank you.