

**Statement of the
Secretary General of the OIC
Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu
to the Permanent Council of the OSCE
6 May 2010**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Secretary General, Excellencies,
Distinguished Representatives,

Allow me at the outset to express my appreciation to you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to address the Permanent Council of the OSCE. I fondly recall my interaction with the Permanent Council in November 2005, soon after my election as the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. I believe that occasion had marked the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship between our two organizations that has grown steadily over the past five years.

Today is another welcome occasion to share with you my viewpoints on issues of mutual concern from the perspective of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, OIC in short.

The goals and objectives of the OIC are not much different from those of the OSCE, as both our organizations are devoted to the cause of international peace and security. The scope of cooperation between the OIC and the OSCE is, therefore, immense and we need to take full advantage of the opportunity by giving further impetus to our existing cooperation through increased interaction and consultations.

I would like to avail this opportunity to pay a special tribute to the Kazakh Chairmanship of the OSCE in successfully fulfilling its heavy but pleasant responsibility. What is of particular significance is that Kazakhstan's Chairmanship of the OSCE will be a run up to the Chair of the OIC in 2011. I am confident that in this process, a legacy will be laid to bring our two organizations closer.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

The OIC celebrated its 40th anniversary last year. And as we look back, we take satisfaction that we could successfully build the 57 Member intergovernmental organization into a viable and proactive partner in international affairs, pursuing a policy that is geared to promote and consolidate global peace, stability, harmony, security and development.

The OIC is guided by the principles of moderation and modernization and these are entrenched in two historic documents, known as the OIC Ten Year Programme of Action and the New OIC Charter. The first provides a visionary road map for the OIC to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. The latter provides the legal framework in modernizing the OIC. The two documents have focused on areas that touch individual lives in the Member States, as well the global community as a whole.

The Ten Year Programme of Action of the OIC was adopted by the OIC Heads of State and Government at the 3rd Extraordinary Summit held in Makkah in 2005. The targets set in this programme encompass issues that include, inter-alia,

combating terrorism and extremism; seeking a just and lasting solution of the Palestine question through the establishment of an independent and sovereign state of Palestine; upholding respect for human rights and good governance; conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post conflict peace building; economic development; addressing environmental issues including climate change and global warming; and social issues including education, and development of women, youth and children. The Ten Year Programme of Action has also set Dialogue among Civilizations as a major priority target to combat incitement to and intolerance of religious diversity, including combating Islamophobia.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The OIC has been actively involved almost all conflict resolution initiatives, including in Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, Darfur and Iraq. I need not go into any great detail to underscore the point that the conflict in Palestine is perhaps the most serious challenge to global peace and security. The international community has been grappled with this issue for more than sixty years, regrettably without any concrete result. It is embarrassing to observe that aggression and oppression of the Palestinian people continue unabated. We remain committed to work for a two-state solution with an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable State of Palestine.

Mr. Chairman,

The OIC is actively pursuing policies to promote good governance and to strengthen democratic institutions and practices in its Member States. We are actively involved in election observation. We plan to increase our activities and involvement in these fields as we gain experience and expertise. I am pleased to inform you that the OIC had fruitful discussions with the ODIHR in Warsaw and in Jeddah for cooperation in these areas.

A landmark development in the recent history of the OIC is the establishment of the Independent Permanent Commission on Human Rights. This 18 member Commission of the OIC, which is to become operational shortly, will be a completely independent body and will function on its own towards strengthening and upholding respect for human rights. The Commission, that will comprise eminent jurists and human rights experts from the Member States, is envisaged to be a credible institution and would seek its enrichment by incorporating some of the best practices from international human rights bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council and the ODIHR.

On the same note, Distinguished Representatives, we have kept our focus and attributed priority to economic, social and cultural activities, as well as to education, science and technology. We took on board issues concerning the most vulnerable groups in society, namely women, children and youth. The adoption of the OIC Plan of Action for Advancement of Women and the decision to establish a Specialised Centre in Cairo to specifically deal with the issue of development of women, their rights and their access to opportunities, including to decision making process, was another epoch making development in our process of modernization and moderation of the OIC.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies,

If I must be frank and candid, which I believe you would expect me to be, I would say that among the gravest threats to stability and peace and a serious challenge to security, is the rise of hatred and intolerance in general and religious and cultural diversity in particular.

The OIC is the second biggest intergovernmental political organization after the UN, with its 57 members and 5 observers. Although the OIC is not a religious organization, it is mandated to coordinate and streamline the collective voice of the Muslim world. We cannot ignore the fact that religion has been drawn into the agenda of international relations by the extremist elements who are active in creating tensions and who threaten stability, harmony and even peace through provocation and incitement on religious grounds. This has necessitated the need to be actively involved in addressing this issue through various diplomatic initiatives.

We discussed this problem at length with the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, Ambassador Adil Akhmetov, and also with the Director of the ODHIR, Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, at the OIC Headquarters in Jeddah and during the OIC delegation's visit to the ODHIR in Warsaw recently. In our interactions, I believe we were able to agree that efforts at various levels, including those by governments and the civil society, have not been able to achieve much headway. The issue is particularly acute in Europe, with the rise of Islamophobia, as well as intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. This phenomenon is an affront to the human rights and to the dignity of Muslims.

My concerns are echoed in an article published in the April 26, 2010 issue of the Newsweek Magazine, written by former British European Affairs Minister Denis Mac Shane, entitled "Europe's New Politics of Fear". In the article Mr Mac Shane says, and I quote, "***There is a new Divide in Europe. Not an iron curtain, but an iron intolerance as politicians revert to blaming minorities for their nations woes. In Western Europe, it is Muslims. In Eastern Europe they are Jews.....***" The concluding message of this article is as follows: "***Radical populism – anti-Muslim in Western Europe and anti-Jewish in Eastern Europe and anti-foreigner and anti-immigrant rhetoric everywhere is no longer fringe politics. Comparisons with pre (second world) war Europe should not be overdrawn. Fascism is dead and not coming back. But a new politics of intolerance is afoot in Europe and no one knows how to deal with it.***"

I believe these words grasp the gravity of the issue. The ominous warning sounded by Mr Mac Shane must be taken seriously. But I would like to go a little further to add that the spate of intolerance of Islam and discrimination and xenophobic treatment of Muslims is not limited to just Western Europe but prevalent in Europe as a whole. The statements coming from radical political parties in Europe and the persistent publication of insulting and obnoxious cartoons and caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Europe and other parts of the Western world, including the USA, under the pretext of freedom of expression is fuelling incitement and intolerance. These elements are defying and challenging the international community's efforts for rapprochement and understanding among civilizations and undermining the sanctity of freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is sacrosanct, but not absolute. There are international instruments that put limits for

responsible use of freedom of expression. The violators must realize the result of their deeds.

The rise in popularity of right wing parties in Europe who have an incomprehensible aversion for Islam and Muslims appear to advocate the cause of clash of civilizations. They have taken the teachings of Islam totally out of context and have involved themselves in corrupting and motivating the mindset of the mainstream European citizens by giving them a distorted and negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims.

The outcome of the November 29, 2009 referendum in Switzerland to ban construction of minarets bears testimony to what I say. The amendment of the Swiss Constitution has constitutionalized, institutionalised and legitimised Islamophobia and intolerance against Islam. I note with regret that its fall out is quickly spreading beyond Switzerland's boundaries with initiatives already underway to emulate the action in other European countries. This move is also against the principle of the freedom of religion, as it dictates how the followers of a belief have to practice their religion. The OIC, its Member States and I myself take great exception to this outcome. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has rightly pointed out, the outcome of this vote is discriminatory, deeply divisive and thoroughly unfortunate, and risks a collision course.

Mr. Chairman,

I have on various occasions called for a historical reconciliation between Islam and Christianity, similar to that of Christianity and Judaism as a productive means to defeat religious intolerance and Islamophobia. I am pleased to inform you that we are in the process of organizing an academic conference on this subject early next year and I would request the support and cooperation of the OSCE to make this event successful and worthwhile.

It is truly unfortunate that many Europeans today are unaware that Islam is not alien to Europe, culturally, socially, scientifically or religiously. Muslims comprise largest community in Europe. Many of them are indigenous Europeans, while others are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. In fact Islam was indigenous to Europe since the 8th century. Over time, Muslims enriched Europe through philosophy, scientific and technological advancements, in medicine, mathematics, astronomy, navigation architecture, arts, literature and even culinary delights. During eight centuries of Islamic presence in Andalusia, Islamic traditions produced a unique blend of religiosity and a culture of tolerance, as well academic freedom unknown to the rest of Europe at that time. This fact was instrumental to propel Europe on its way to humanism and renaissance. This ideal of the Andalusia tolerance, sadly, did not survive throughout European history, but it did survive in Bosnia and different Balkan countries. Islam has been indigenous to Southeast Europe for six centuries with deeply engrained traditions and six centuries of pleasant memories.

The OIC took the lead on the concept of dialogue among civilizations as early as 1998. This concept was among the inspirations behind the establishment of the Alliance of Civilizations. The OIC has been spontaneous in lending its support to the AoC. But its existence and purpose has to be vindicated by fulfilling the mandate it has been provided by the recommendations of the Report of the High Level Group.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Representatives,

In the light of what I have just underlined, I believe it is high time for the OSCE and OIC to put together tangible and result oriented efforts to motivate the people, starting with those at the grassroots, to reject the extremists and to develop in them a culture of respect and tolerance for the whole range of civil and political, as well as economic, social and cultural rights of people of all beliefs and backgrounds.

I would urge you that this looming threat to stability, harmony and security posed by the perpetrators of intolerance and extremism to the OSCE area and beyond finds priority also in the agenda of the forthcoming OSCE Conference in Astana in June. I am pleased to learn that a side event on Islamophobia will take place in Astana. It would be an appropriate occasion to deliberate on the dangers of escalation of Islamophobia in the OSCE area and to come out with some practical recommendations.

I would like to conclude by quoting an Arabic proverb which says “Four things do not come back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity”. Let us ensure that we are not blamed by posterity for neglecting the opportunity to combat intolerance and fear mongering.

I thank you.