

**Muslims of Europe – Challenges and Opportunities**  
**(Istanbul Conference, 1 - 2 July 2006)**

*(Remarks By Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative Of The Chairman-In-Office Of The OSCE On Combating Intolerance And Discrimination Against Muslims, At The First Breakout Session On “Identity”)*

**Context**

At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation for being able to address this important and topical conference in my capacity as the personal representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

Islamophobia and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is not a new phenomena. There are historical, cultural, religious and psychological reasons behind it.

However, in the post-September 11 period, this phenomena has acquired a new and disturbing dimension and the social climate facing Muslims in Western countries has deteriorated. In this period, pre-existing prejudices and discriminatory tendencies against Muslims became reinforced.

Discrimination against Muslims is a clear manifestation of hate crime and as such generates fear, feelings of stigmatization, marginalization and rejection. The net result is heightened anxiety and rising violence. On the other hand, intolerance and discrimination that Muslims face is an assault on identity and human dignity.

As I see it, the range of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is dominated generally by ,

- a) ancient hatreds and old prejudices,
- b) powerful new trend of anti- immigration,
- c) antipathy towards Muslims in general, believing that Islam is not compatible with democracy, human rights and contemporary values,

- d) political rhetoric, coupled with biased and misleading media coverage,
- e) identification of terrorism and violence with Islam.

The problems encountered by Muslims in the west are structural, perceptual and behavioural, and finally we also observe discriminatory practices.

## **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 in which 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.

### **Identity:**

These observations lead me to the question of identity.

As a concept, identity can be defined as the fact of being who or what a person or a community is. In other words, it entails a close similarity or affinity, regarding oneself as sharing the same characteristics as someone/someones else. As such, identity is the badge that distinguishes one from the others.

As I see it, a large part of the problems that Muslims in Europe face is due to ethnic, cultural and religious differences from the mainstream communities, leading to a sort of politics of identity. And this phenomenon has a double effect:

- a.) A marginalized community, in our case the Muslims, are embattled to affirm their unique identity,
- b.) The host community, on the other hand, is afraid to lose its identity in view of the growing numbers of the Muslim immigrant communities.

Muslims, on the other hand, are in a process of re-constructing their cultural and religious identities.

In that respect, the issue of integration can represent a confluence of identities; legal, political, social, cultural and spiritual.

Muslim migrant communities have definitely changed the ethnic and cultural landscape of Europe, through their linguistic, religious, cultural and traditional values and identities. Receiving countries, on their part, neglected or failed in their attempts to establish comprehensive policies for the integration of Muslim migrants. They are therefore facing a

big challenge of accommodating Muslims, with all the problems this non-accommodation entails.

The presence of Muslim communities in Europe is neither culturally, nor religiously neutral, because they did not arrive naked. They brought values, traditions, beliefs and even images. This, in turn, necessitates a change in their new environment. Homogeneity is no more a criterion of the definition of our present societies.

These observations lead me to the question of whether there is a contradiction in having dual or multiple identities. My answer is simply no. One can have multiple but not contradictory identities, citizenship being the overarching identity, without losing other characteristics.

### **Response – What 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.

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.) On the other hand, clear criteria for reporting and registering of hate crimes must be established and reporting of hate crimes must be encouraged.

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, 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 must be created.

Another point that deserves utmost importance is education. Especially younger generation should be provided with educational programs that would foster tolerance, understanding and respect to “the other.” Related to education is of course training of law enforcement officials.

Furthermore, in the field of public discourse on Muslims and Islam, two points need to be underlined:

a) Political rhetoric: responsible politicians, both of the government and of the opposition, must underline the importance of correct and unbiased discourse and should also refrain from hate speech and other manifestations of extremism and discrimination. A message of encouraging tolerance, non-discrimination, understanding and respect to all must be voiced.

b) The media: the media can play a very positive role in promoting inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony. This is what is expected from responsible journalism. On the other hand, the media may also play a very negative and divisive role in projecting wrong and inaccurate messages. Therefore, with due respect to the freedom of expression, governments can assist or encourage creation of self-regulatory media bodies to deal with manifestations of discrimination and racism.

Finally, 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? As I underlined earlier, 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 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 a reality we must reach those groups who do not wish to engage in dialogue and we must educate those who do not wish to understand or accept the diversity that characterizes the western societies.

In conclusion, let me stress that 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 world and the West.