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**OSCE CONFERENCE ON COMBATING DISCRIMINATION AND
PROMOTING MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING**
**Follow-up to the Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism and
Other Forms of Intolerance**
Plenary Session 2

Combating Intolerance and Discrimination
against Muslims
a presentation by
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Mr Chairman Ambassador Omur Urhun

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

At the outset, please allow me Mr. Chairman to congratulate the OSCE for organizing this all important Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania for hosting it. I feel particularly pleased at this opportunity to share some ideas and proposal in this plenary session on “Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims” from the OIC point of view.

I would also like to take this opportunity to convey through you, to H.E. Mr. Adrian Cioroianu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania and to H.E. Mr. Miguel Angel Moratinos, Foreign Minister of Spain and Chairman of the OSCE, the greetings of His Excellency Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, for their kind invitation to him to participate in Conference. His prior commitments have stood in the way of his personal participation and presence here at this august conference. I carry with me his good tidings for all the distinguished delegates assembled here and his best wishes for a successful outcome of the conference.

On April 26-28 this year, the Organization of the Islamic Conference in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Azerbaijan had organized a similar conference under the theme “Role of the Media in the Development of Tolerance and Mutual Understanding” in Baku. A very esteemed and respected invitee to the Baku Conference was the former President of Romania, H.E. Ion Iliescu. In his statement he said and I quote “The lessons of history made Romania to develop a culture of tolerance and dialogue between cultures, civilizations and religions, a climate of accepting diversity, of considering it as an advantage of Romania in the relations with other nations”. He added that “ For Romanians, the ethnic, religious, cultural diversity is a wealth and mark of identity”. In my view, President Iliescu did not speak for Romania only, but for all the civilizations that make up the present global village.

Mr. Chairman

Tolerance is one of the pillars on which human civilization has been built upon. Every religion on earth preaches it; great statesmen and philosophers have been inspired by it; mass political movements have struggled to uphold it and present day democratic governments cannot function properly without it. The basic tenets of tolerance are compassion, understanding and appreciation of the right of others to differ in beliefs and faiths, cultural norms and values. These are the foundations of a civilized society and crucial for peaceful coexistence.

Throughout history, tolerance in society has been fragile and its most serious challenge has been intolerance. Time and again, intolerance raised its ugly face in the shape of xenophobia, racial hatred, interfaith animosity or cultural prejudice resulting in wars and ethnicity that have taken a heavy toll on human lives, human misery and endangering peace and security. Alarming but true, the present day world that we live in has once again become a victim of the rising trends of growing intolerance. And in this ugly situation, Islam and Muslims have unfortunately been targeted the most. This poses a clear and present danger to undo the fabric of our civilization and destroy our social, cultural and political institutions.

Perhaps it would be pertinent here to re-visit the question, whether there is at all a valid reason for the outrage and outcry in the Muslim world of feelings of being discriminated and profiled and to be up against a campaign of defamation of Islam? My spontaneous response would be: of course there is, otherwise it would not be necessary for us to have this debate at all and that it is something which is neither the first, or in my estimation, would be the last of its kind.

Mr. Chairman ,

The phenomenon of Islamophobia now concerns everybody. The United Nations has tried to address the issue by holding several seminars. The former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan in a speech on 7th December 2004 stated inter alia that Islam’s tenets are

frequently distorted and taken out of context, with particular acts or practices being taken to represent or to symbolize a rich and complex faith. He said that “some claim that Islam is incompatible with democracy, or irrevocably hostile to modernity and the rights of women. And in too many circles, disparaging remarks about Muslims are allowed to pass without censure, with the result that prejudice acquires a veneer of acceptability. Stereotypes also depict Muslims as opposed to the West, despite a history not only of conflict but also of cooperation, and of influencing and enriching each other’s art and science. European civilization would not have advanced to the extent it did had Christian scholars not benefited from the learning and literature of Islam in the Middle Ages and later”.

In a foreword to the publication of the document entitled, “Perceptions of Discrimination and Islamophobia: Voices from Members of the Muslims Communities, the European Union”, the Director of the EUMC (European Monitoring Center for Racism and Xenophobia) Beate Winkler acknowledged that the evidence gathered by the EUMC over the last few years indicated that since September 11, European Muslims have been seriously affected by an “increasingly hostile social climate”. The Director went on to add that subsequent to the incidents such as the murder of Dutch Film Director Theo Van Gogh and the Madrid and London bombings further exacerbated prejudices and fuelled more incidents of hostility and aggression. Introducing the report that was based on 58 in depth interviews with Muslim communities in 10 EU countries, the Director of the EUMC stated that it was important to recount the experiences of European Muslims in regard to discrimination and Islamophobic incidents and discourse which has been increasingly found in the public and political domain and also to identify the social and political context which gives rise to this verbal and physical aggression.

Mr. Chairman

As the chief executive of the Organization of the Islamic Conference representing 57 Muslim sovereign countries, Secretary General Prof. Dr. Eklemeddin Ihsanoglu has resolutely taken up the challenge to counter defamation of Islam and discrimination against Muslims. The Secretary General from the day of his assumption of office in 2001, had taken up the issue of countering Islamophobia with a sense of extreme urgency and priority.. He got together a panel of eminent Islamic Scholars to study the issue in depth. Their report was considered by the 3rd Extraordinary Summit in Makkah in December 2005. The Heads of State and Government of the OIC member states in consideration of its dangerous implications included countering Islamophobia in the OIC Ten-Year Programme of Action through the establishment of an Observatory at the General Secretariat.

The Secretary General has taken a pro-active role in projecting the actual image of Islam and contributing to the consolidation and protection of the cultural identity of the Muslim communities. In his interactions with world leaders and in his interventions in many international conferences, the OIC Secretary General has also strongly argued the necessity for a historical reconciliation between Islam and the West. This is not any knee

jerk proposal as a similar approach has been successfully tried between Christianity and Judaism.

One of the most prominent present day advocates of the concept of the Alliance of Civilizations and someone who has resolutely spoken out against defamation of religions, Islam in particular, Secretary General Professor Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu believes that our main objective must be to develop effective linkages to further inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, tolerance and understanding. At an International Conference organized by the OIC at the Wilton Park Center in London on 2 May 2006, the OIC Secretary General mentioned that xenophobia, hate crimes, discrimination, marginalization, stereotyping and defamation targeting Muslims and their religion have become common in the West, especially after the 9/11 attacks, Madrid and London bombings and the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo Van Gogh. He said that the developments have reached a point of driving a wedge between the governments and the peoples of the Western and Muslim countries and in turn are further damaging the image of the West in the minds of 1.3 billion Muslims. He added that prime motivation behind the terrifying phenomenon of stereotyping that Muslims have begun to suffer in the first decade of the 21st century, is “ignorance and fear.”

A point that OIC Secretary General Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu has emphasized time and again is that Islam and the West could and should live and co-exist together in peace and harmony as the common denominators that link them outweigh their differences. In his view, we share the universal standards that human dignity is inviolable and striving for democracy is an important foundation for human dignity, individual liberties, and freedom of religion. He firmly believes that by deploying joint efforts for the recognition of the other and cultural diversity and addressing the root causes of terrorism, the world would be very close to a historic reconciliation between Islam and the West, and deny “*la raison d’etre*” for Islamophobia.

The OIC’s prescription for a historical reconciliation is based on dialogue between Islam and the West that would lead us to an era of larger understanding, harmony and concord, and to better future for our present and future generations. Our focus now must be not on where we have been, but on where we are heading.

Mr. Chairman,

The 9/11 incident was surely one of the worst acts of terrorism in history. While the terrorist act was carried out by the 19 Muslim extremists, regrettably it was attributed to Muslim community and Islam in general by many in the West including the media. In the process, it contributed to the proliferation of intolerance against Muslims. A new word “Islamophobia” was coined. In the West the term depicted a fear of Islam as a religion that abets terror; while in the Muslim world, the term connoted Western societies’ deep prejudice against Islam and total disregard for its values and beliefs. In short, Muslims who true to their faith believe in the values of tolerance, peace and peaceful co-existence have been subjected to discrimination, prejudice, profiling and even persecution.

Today, the world has been reduced to the keyboard of a PC and governments and individuals are only seconds away from each other, irrespective of their physical location. The access to the internet is un-limited: from school children to nuclear scientists; local politicians to world leaders and from small business to corporate giants.

The growth and development of ICT and the internet have brought about a transformation in the media of unimaginable proportions as well. It has set forth a race that no one wants to lag behind. The most developed to the least developed countries have all experienced a proliferation of the thousands of 24 hour electronic media network and broadcast stations. Almost every newspaper in the world today has an internet edition which are scanned and read by millions the world over. The news reports, feature articles and opinions expressed therein are more than often copied, multiplied and transmitted to a much larger group of the population by individuals or organizations to suit their agendas. Many are constructive and equally many are, if I may say so, destructive or to put it a little more mildly, counter-productive.

The process of globalization of the media and its technological development have come both as a blessing and a curse and therefore calls for responsible handling. Its misuse or abuse at the hands of the irresponsible have caused great damage to peaceful coexistence of societies and civilizations. The unrestricted access to the websites that include the most vulnerable in our societies in particular the youths and children who are the easiest victims.

Nine Eleven has caused a major upset in global affairs and has changed the conduct of international relations forever. Its aftermath has affected the lives of every citizen of the world. The incident was covered live world wide by the electronic media of the USA and its international networks and sparked off worldwide anger and shock. The media gave the broadest possible publicity and rightfully so, because of the vicious criminality of the act. The outrage against the terrorists was global, both in the West and in the Muslim world. Regrettably, the forceful condemnation by the Muslim countries and communities of the terrorist act was given low profile coverage if not ignored, by the Western media.

It is true that the continued stereotyping and discrimination experienced by the Muslims and defamation of Islam that they hold so sacred have driven many of them to react with anger because of the indignity and insults felt by them. As a result of stereotyping and profiling, Muslims in general have become suspect in the West and Islam is being perceived to condone terror. Nothing could be far from the truth. As recently as June 1, 2007, the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Holy Makkah, Abdul Rahman Saudais while leading the Friday prayers at the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, Pakistan, declared that a message needs to be sent across the world that Islam is a religion of peace and that Islam abhors violence and terrorism, teaches peace and harmony and is against sectarianism. Leaders of Muslim countries have from time to time issued strong statements condemning terrorism and declared their firm determination to fight terror.

In Western media reporting on terrorism, more than often, fingers are pointed towards the Muslims and thereby arousing feelings of hate, prejudice and intolerance against the Muslim community. The continued acrimonious anti Muslim reporting in the western media has created an impression in the Muslim World that the West's war on terror was actually turning into a war on Islam. This was exacerbated as Muslims living in Western countries or traveling to those countries, were increasingly being subjected to face profiling and rigorous interrogation.

A situation was taking the shape of a world getting divided by intolerance and prejudice among faiths and cultures. The media can do a lot to help engender a healing process. The looming danger of a world polarized by suspicion and mistrust among faiths can be addressed only by confidence building measures of dialogue and understanding. The media has to take a pro-active role in motivating the world to embrace partnership and tolerance.

The need of the hour therefore of all stakeholders is to sensitize the world of the dangerous consequences of intolerance and to adopt an approach to both talk and to listen. A collective initiative that include political leaders, Governments, NGOs and the civil society must be taken to guide and motivate the world community to remain engaged in a serious dialogue in a spirit of mutual understanding for developing respect and appreciation of opposing points of view. Self-righteousness and attitudes to preach and patronize must be substituted by the will to listen, appreciate and accommodate.

We are often confronted with the dilemma of setting limits to the media's right to freedom of expression. The media has its own values and right to freedom of expression is surely sacrosanct. But the exercise of those rights have to be tempered with responsibility to avoid anarchy or violence. It has to be ensured that the power in possession of the modern day media is handled in a most responsible manner and not misused or abused by utterances, writings or caricatures that may incite intolerance and destabilize societies.

Criticism or commentary must be constructive and should not run contrary to the international community's efforts to develop tolerance and mutual understanding. The cause of promoting tolerance and understanding may be defeated if one were to take a position of championing freedom of expression by publishing, broadcasting or telecasting items knowing fully that the report may spark off violent consequences.

It would not be practical to assume that there is a quick shot recipe to resolve the issue of intolerance. But we can surely be optimistic in achieving a lot to have the media alongside and play a pro-active role in raising awareness of the negative consequences of intolerance in society. The challenge for the US is to develop a universally accepted code of ethics of where to draw the line on the principle of freedom of expression.

Two serious examples of overstretching the right of freedom of expression were the publication of the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a Danish

newspaper and reproduced in other recognized news papers such as the Le Monde and the remarks made by His Holiness Pope Benedict involving Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in September last year. These incidents had resulted in shock and anger throughout the Muslim world and was seen as the Western world's indifference to the values that are most sacred to the Muslims. Of course many Western governments reacted against the reports and a statement of regret was issued by the Vatican. At the same time most maintained that they could not intervene in the right to freedom of expression.

The lack or insufficient understanding of the Islamic faith in the West is also due to centuries of colonization and foreign occupation of the Muslim world that left them languishing in poverty and ignorance. In the process, the glory of the contributions made by the Muslims in enriching world civilizations have either been lost in their history or blunted by the indifferent attitude of their colonial masters.

Islam does not contradict other faiths such as Christianity and Judaism. It recognizes and accepts Jesus and Moses as Prophets of Islam also, it accepts the Immaculate Birth and it complements these two faiths by revealing the ultimate truth.

Having argued the above, I must state here that one feels encouraged that the realization to address the issue of discrimination of Muslims and defamation of religions including Islam is gradually getting serious attention of the Western governments and the civil society communities.

While the hate monger extremists and the supremacist organizations and their followers might go unabated, the more responsible and policy makers are taking serious steps. The latest announcement from the Vatican made on May 28, 2007 of Pope Benedict decision restore the Pontifical Council for Inter Religious Dialogue as a separate Department in the Vatican is as a welcome and positive development and we believe that mandating the department to engage in a constructive dialogue with Islam will contribute constructively towards bringing Muslims and the Catholic world closer in understanding each other.

The proactive role taken by the OIC General Secretariat in countering attempts to defame Islam and move towards a constructive Dialogue with the Western World appears to be bearing fruit. Western Governments and the civil society are realizing that the acts of defamation of Islam is counterproductive and that it has to be stopped and steps must be undertaken towards engagement with Islam.

The OIC has continued to maintain a regular liaison with the OSCE on issues of common interest, particularly on the question of combating extremism, Islamophobia and intolerance. The Secretary General held a fruitful meeting with Mr. Marc Perrin de Brinchambaut, the OSCE Secretary General, in New York in September 2006. Upon your initiative as Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, an OIC representative participated in a Special Workshop on Islamophobia in Istanbul in September 2006. Likewise, another OIC representative attended the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in

Warsaw in October 2006. Your participation as the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims at OIC Workshop on Islamophobia and in Istanbul in February 2007 and on Tolerance and Mutual Understanding in Baku in April 2007, adequately articulated the plight of Muslims subjected to profiling and discrimination.

The recently held Fourth Session of the UN Human Rights Council held in Geneva adopted, a resolution (A/HRC/4/L.12) tabled by Pakistan on behalf of the OIC entitled “Combating defamation of religions” was adopted with 24 votes in favour, 14 against, and nine abstentions. The resolution was a major step forward in sensitizing the international community on the serious impact of defamation of religions and the urgent need for cooperation of all to address the issue. It was interesting to note that the delegate speaking on behalf of the European Union admitted that “there were increasing risks of stereotyping Muslims after the events of September 11” and adding that “the European Union was strongly committed to fighting this phenomenon”. She further stated that all forms of religious intolerance should be fought as discrimination based on religion and belief was not limited to adherents to Islam, it was equally relevant with regard to other beliefs and that followers of all religions were victims of human rights violations. The EU however abstained in the voting. A favorable vote would have created the conditions for collective action against the perpetrators involved in the defamation of religions.

At the just concluded 34th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers held in Islamabad on May 14-16, 2007, the Foreign Ministers of the 57 members countries were unanimous in their view that one of the main reasons for Islamophobic actions was insufficient knowledge or understanding of Islam. They stressed that it was wrong to draw a link between Islam with terrorism and were firm in stating the point that terrorism has no religion and that the OIC was an active partner in the international community’s war against terrorism. The Ministers rejected the extremists who were using the name of Islam to legitimize their acts of terror. They said that all would have to understand the fact that Islam negates violence.

The Foreign Ministers also expressed the view that that OIC should seek close ties with United Nations and relevant multilateral Western Organizations, such as European Union (EU), through both bilateral and multilateral actions and lobby. Truly, a network of relevant Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) from Muslim and non-Muslim background, scholars, and think-tanks is a strong need to counter Islamophobia by exchanging information on how Muslims are being treated, and how Islam is being addressed by the West. They stressed that a sincere dialogue with the West was needed and it has to be in two-way perspective in order to create confidence among all faiths in respecting each other’s diversity, and the presence of OIC at Alliance of Civilizations was a strong approach to achieve this goal.

The OIC Foreign Ministers laid great importance on education for all, in particular for the younger generation in order to enlighten them with the positive and real image of Islam mainly in matters related to tolerance towards other faiths the quality of being Muslim in terms of respecting other’s privacy, the leader’s accountability to their

community as well as providing solid basis on what Islam stands for in issues that the West assumes as their main basis for a society's freedom: democracy, human rights, women empowerment, and so forth.

The document circulated by the US delegation at this conference underscores the need to address issue of intolerance against Muslims. The prestigious US think tank Brookings Institution located in Washington DC very recently held a workshop entitled "US- Muslim Relations: Engaging the Muslim World". The workshop was held in the backdrop that US standing in the Muslim world and recommended that the US should develop a strategy that will effectively engage the US with the Muslim world.

The OIC Secretary General is expected address at the OIC-Georgetown University, Washington DC Symposium on 20-21 September, 2007 in collaboration with the US based Muslim NGO CAIR. The Conference is expected to be attended by 200 guests that would include political leaders, religious scholars. academics eminent personalities and students.

The Secretary General of the OIC has also remained focused on projecting Islam in the United Nations. The most recent in this initiative was his participation in the High Level Segment of UN Human Rights Council Meeting in Geneva in February this year and in his meeting with the Secretary General of the United Nations Mr. Ban Ki Moon on the sidelines of Arab League Summit held in Riyadh in the end of March 2007. During the meeting the two Secretaries General held intensive discussions on the dangerous implication of the issue of defamation of Islam on global peace and security. They agreed that all possible actions must be taken to raise global awareness on the need for understanding and tolerance among faiths and there must be accepted mechanism and joint action programmes adopted by the international community to address avoidable provocations and incitement and end discrimination and vilification of Islam and cooperate towards effective and meaningful dialogue among civilizations.

The existing Charter of the OIC stipulates that the aim of the Organization would be to, inter alia, strengthen Islamic solidarity among the member states through cooperation in political, economic, social, cultural and scientific fields and the struggle of all Muslim peoples for the safeguard of their dignity, independence and national rights. Therefore when the situation arose where the Muslims were increasing being subjected to several of discriminations and profiling on account of their religious faith and beliefs, the OIC could not remain a silent spectator and had to embark on a pro-active role to uphold the responsibilities mandated upon it by the OIC Charter.

The OIC initiative for "Dialogue Among Civilizations", which was presented as an alternative to the theories of "Clash of Civilizations" has proven to be a successful one and was adopted by the UN which declared the year 2001 as the year of Dialogue among Civilizations and established a program of action to that effect. Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu took the initiative towards an Alliance of Civilizations that was taken up by the UN and co-sponsored by the Prime Ministers of Turkey and Spain. The

change at the helm in the leadership of the UN at the beginning of 2007 has not undermined the urgency of the concept of Alliance of Civilization. The new UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has held several meetings with Prof Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu in the recent past during which he underscored in no uncertain terms the importance and relevance of the OIC and the role of its Secretary General for a successful outcome of the Alliance of Civilization project.

Mr. Ban Ki Moon's decision to appoint former President of Portugal Mr. Jorge Sampaio as the High Representative of the UN Office of the Alliance of Civilizations is a positive development. The appointment has been hailed by world leaders including the Prime Minister of Turkey, the Secretary General of the OIC Prof Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and Mr. Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). As High Representative, Mr. Sampaio will be expected to provide the vision and leadership required, especially to promote the Alliance of Civilizations as a credible and viable attempt to diminish the dangerous tensions between diverse societies and their threat to international stability.

In conclusion let me say that the Western world has substantial political, economic and strategic stakes and interest in the Muslim world that necessitates the support and cooperation of the member countries of the OIC. I am confident that by working together in building understanding and confidence, we can defeat the extremists and make our world safer, congenial and better for our future generations to live in harmony and peace. The decision of the Government of Spain to host a meeting on intolerance against Islam in Cordova in fall this year will surely be a major step forward in this regard.

I thank you