

COMBATING INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS

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It goes without saying that we have to pay a special attention not only to promotion of mutual understanding and respect for diversity, but also to combating all forms of intolerance and discrimination, including those against Muslims.

Let me start with a few observations concerning recent developments in this field. Various types of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims are driven by a combination of racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance, and specifically through hostility towards Islam and its adherents. Therefore, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line between issues of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and issues in relation to racism and xenophobia, as well as violations of freedom of religion. Nor can we address these issues separately.

In recent years the international community has observed several trends in relation to intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, including biased and discriminatory portrayal of Muslims in political discourse and media. Both populist politicians and biased media reporting have fueled fears of some segments of the majority populations that they are losing their identity at the expense of Islam. Parallel to this, an overarching trend in many Western countries in recent years has been a retreat from multicultural policies founded

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upon the principle of respect for diversity, in favour of assimilation policies and measures that restrict religious and/or cultural expression. One of the extreme forms of these policies is discriminatory administrative obstacles or even attempts to adopt laws, which aim to prevent building of mosques and especially minarets.

On the other hand, the ongoing fight against terrorism, which has led to an association of terrorism with Muslims and Islam, has also contributed to an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment across the West. Another unfortunate trend has been the profiling of Muslims by law enforcement and/or security officials, which includes targeted security checks and official calls to introduce passenger profiling based on ethnicity and religion. This hostile environment has caused an increase of physical attacks and verbal harassments against individuals, as well as desecration and vandalism of mosques, cultural centers, cemeteries and sacred objects. As a result, Muslims have started to feel, more and more, that they are in an insecure situation and alienated from the mainstream society.

Violent manifestations of hatred and intolerance against members of religious groups threaten not only the security of individuals, but also stability and security in our region. Therefore, we have to intensify our efforts to develop a comprehensive response to countering the increasing intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, together with other forms of intolerance. We must also firmly reject the identification of terrorism and extremism with a particular religion or culture.

Many international organizations have adopted specific decisions on combating intolerance and discrimination, which also explicitly highlight the need to combat intolerance against Muslims. These decisions require States to intensify their actions through the development of educational and awareness-raising measures as well as increased efforts to collect and maintain reliable data on hate crimes. The decisions of these international organizations also highlight the importance of a continued and strengthened interfaith and intercultural dialogue to promote

greater tolerance, respect and mutual understanding. Governments, on the other hand, have repeatedly declared their determination to combat hate crimes, which are also fueled by racist and xenophobic propaganda in the media. Additionally, the essential role that free and independent media can play in countering prejudices is acknowledged.

Further declarations and commitments to address intolerance and discrimination against Muslims were also made at other international meetings and high-level conferences. These gatherings concluded that intolerance and discrimination against Muslims should be regarded with utmost concern and acts based on such intolerance and discrimination should be condemned without reservation. Otherwise, prejudices against Muslims may erect a new wall of division within and among the international community.

In short, international commitments and standards are well established. However, one can not say the same for implementation of these commitments by the Governments. This is our main dilemma.

One of the key priorities during my activities to raise awareness to combat discrimination and intolerance against Muslims has been to establish bonds of strong cooperation with Muslim community-based organizations and to develop concrete projects in combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

For this reason, I highly value this seminar and wish to express my appreciation to COJEP for organizing it. During the last four years I have not only followed, but also tried to participate to the activities of COJEP in the fields of promoting tolerance and combating discrimination. And in all these activities, I have noted with appreciation their dedication to human rights and to human dignity.

I think we should attempt to learn more about the key concerns facing Muslim communities in the West, to facilitate discussion on prospective areas of action, and to identify potential areas of cooperation, in close collaboration with the civil

society. On the other hand, we must continue to address the increasingly negative political rhetoric, media coverage and intellectualization of anti-Muslim sentiment. It should not be forgotten that stereotypes and prejudice are to a great extent rooted in insufficient knowledge and understanding of Muslim communities and Islam. In public discourse and in the media, diverse ways of living of Muslims and their different perceptions, problems and social backgrounds often find limited reflection. In enlightening the general public in this respect, the role to be played by the civil society organizations can not be under estimated. Let us continue to work together.