



**Report on Wilton Park Conference WPS06/27
held in association with the General Secretariat
of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC)¹**

**CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN EUROPE AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD:
WORKING TOGETHER FOR CONSTRUCTIVE POLICIES AND PARTNERSHIPS**

Tuesday 2 May – Wednesday 3 May 2006

Introduction

1. Fear and hatred of Muslims in Europe, often referred to as Islamophobia, and a similar growth in anti-western sentiments in Muslim majority countries, fed by perceptions of bias in US and European policies in the Middle East region, have been rising. The publication and republication of cartoons in European media caricaturing the Prophet Mohammad in a way perceived as defamatory and insulting by many in the Islamic world² have added to tensions between Muslim majority countries and the West. At the initiative of the General Secretariat of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Wilton Park brought together senior policy-makers from Europe and OIC member states, officials from the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE), with representatives from Muslim communities in Europe and North America, non-governmental organisations, academics and other experts to discuss practical measures to combat stereotypes and prejudice in both Europe and the Islamic world.

¹ Founded in 1969 and based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the OIC represents 57 predominantly Muslim countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East and, after the United Nations, is the second largest intergovernmental organisation in terms of the number of member states.

² The term 'Islamic world' is used in this report to designate Muslim majority countries but, as with the concept of 'the West', fails to convey adequately the diversity among countries included.

Context of Muslim communities in Europe

2. With increased immigration since the 1960s, predominantly in northern Europe, or even before in the case of the UK, and more recently in southern Europe, there are now at least 15 million citizens of Muslim faith in the European Union. Muslims form the largest segment of immigrant populations. While Muslims in the UK are mostly of South Asian origin, in continental Europe Muslims come largely from North Africa and Turkey. Northern Europe largely has first and second generational Muslim families, whereas in Southern Europe there are larger numbers of unaccompanied men of working age. While the more longstanding communities may generally be better integrated, younger Muslims in these communities are often more disillusioned due to their higher socio-economic expectations. Most Muslim communities are in the lowest socio-economic groups, and Muslim ghettos are prevalent in every European Union country with a sizeable Muslim population. Despite their different ethnicities and origins, Muslims are most frequently classified as a group on the basis of their common religion. With the international environment dominating domestic politics since the assaults of 9/11, there has generally been a marked deterioration in Muslims' sense of belonging in Europe. The introduction of citizenship tests and enhanced anti-terrorism measures, for example, are perceived to play a role in this trend. For some Muslims there is discomfort in finding a mutual accommodation with a secular popular culture, which is often regarded as materialistic and even profane.

Policy responses and practical measures to combat stereotypes

Integration of Muslim communities in Europe

3. Most agree that multiculturalism has come under severe strain in recent years. Europe's demographic composition is changing markedly and rapidly. Some question whether it is possible to maintain political unity through common and shared values and remain open to a diverse range of cultures and identities. Have migrants brought a 'village mentality' with them and come to Europe with little preparedness to integrate, seeking the barest interaction with the majority community? Lack of familiarity with the language and culture of the host country, and practices such as pre-arranged marriages with a spouse from the country of origin, are cited as creating barriers to integration.

4. Others believe that the issues at stake are not, in the end, exclusively about Islam and Muslims. They are generally relevant wherever there are ethnic, national and religious minorities, or migration, and apply wherever social and other inequality and injustice are found, including in Muslim majority countries. Stereotyping and prejudice arise when there is marginalisation and alienation, primarily among minorities, whether they be migrants or indigenous workers in derelict European industrial towns. The policy response should be based on recognition, respect and inclusion. While some Muslims argue the absence of official recognition of Islam is discriminatory when other religions are officially recognised, others believe that legal recognition in some parts of Europe has not necessarily advanced Muslim inclusion through the establishment of representative and consultative organisations. It is rather a matter of being recognised as equal participants and stakeholders in a society which respects the contribution of all its component parts and seeks to include all stakeholders in the unending processes of negotiating practical solutions to shared problems, establishing elements of common interest and identity and laying the grounds for a shared future.

5. There is a need to promote common citizenship, and recognise multiculturalism, rather than speak of minorities. Some argue there are European countries that still need to come to terms with accepting their Muslim citizens as 'real' citizens. Muslims in Europe, and Muslim organisations, are emerging as a political force, and need to engage in policy formulation – they have the status and numbers to be able to do so. They have the right to dissent from their government without being identified as 'disloyal'. On the other hand, some governments, while declaring their commitment to dialogue, consider they are hampered in engaging with Muslim communities because of the lack of representative Muslim bodies or disunity among these. Answers may lie in creating partnerships at the local level to build mutual trust, which will gradually cohere to form national movements from local initiatives. Muslims should be present and engaged in public institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, the police, army, civil service and other walks of life. Many Muslims in Europe are citizens and consider their country their home. They must be part of the solution to the current problems, not as token 'objects' but as 'subjects'.

6. Fear of change, another cause of prejudice, is a natural and legitimate reaction particularly in broadly homogenous societies. An 'us and them' mentality can be dangerous when manipulated politically. The threat to multicultural societies comes from extremists on both sides. It can be tackled by dialogue and creating opportunities for various groups to encounter and 'get to know' one another. Some believe it is important to establish mainstream schools, enabling children to mix from the youngest age, promoting active parent-teacher associations and encouraging the local community to become involved in the running of its own institutions. The same principle can also be extended to the international level, promoting youth and student exchanges across countries in virtual terms through use of the internet and video links.

7. Economic and social measures are also needed to address the parallel societies that have formed, tackling inequalities in access to education, employment, housing and health. Community outreach programmes should be instituted, and assistance given to build the capacity of Muslim communities and civil society organisations to enable them to work effectively with local, regional and national authorities. The UK Government's Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund, set up to further strengthen community cohesion, is an example.

Role of education in combating stereotypes in Europe and in the Islamic world

8. In the longer-term, education provides the key to combating the ignorance and misinformation that often underlies the fear and alienation prevalent in today's European societies. There is widespread agreement that greater knowledge about Islam is needed in Europe, and equally about the West in Muslim majority societies. This requires commitment and long-term planning. Some cite the positive results of UK experience in introducing multi-faith religious education into schools, begun some 30 years ago. This requires not only a gradual change in the content of text books and other teaching materials, and the structure of syllabuses. It also involves training a new generation of teachers. Many European countries retain church-controlled forms of religious education, and some have no religious education at all.

9. At a more adult level, there is a need in Europe to have greater access to the debate taking place about Islam and about global developments in major Muslim

majority countries. Translation of key texts is necessary to enable young Muslims in Europe, and others, to take part in this debate. While Islamic and Middle Eastern studies programmes at European universities have been sponsored in recent years by wealthy Arab and other sources, the EU could reciprocate by supporting the establishment of European studies at universities in countries taking part in the Barcelona process, promoting student and teacher exchanges, and greater familiarity with the West.

10. Accurate information about religions other than Islam is a major shortcoming in the Muslim world. The OIC is well-placed to promote measures among its member states to rectify this. The need for quality education generally to provide the skills to compete in a globalized economy, identified in the *Arab Human Development Report 2003 – Building a Knowledge Society*, has been recognised in a number of countries in the Middle East, and reforms are taking place. There is growing acceptance that ‘modernisation’ is not synonymous with ‘Westernisation’. Muslims in Europe and in Muslim majority countries also need to examine how Islamic education is being taught; some consider it over-reliant on learning by rote. It should rather contribute towards promoting critical minds and address what is happening in the contemporary world.

11. The teaching of history in Europe and the Islamic world is an issue which warrants further attention. Some point to the need for Europe to ‘remember history honestly’. The achievements and contributions of Islamic civilisations to the progress of mankind should receive greater recognition in the teaching of history in the West. The Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, based in Istanbul, is undertaking a project of random sampling of history textbooks, in cooperation with other organisations. The Council of Europe has a longstanding involvement in this area. In the USA, the Council on Islamic Education, a national faith-based organisation, reviews public school books from a multicultural perspective to prevent use of stereotypical depictions.

Role of legislation and measures at the national level to combat Islamophobia

12. The recent caricature controversy has prompted a lively debate on the role of legislation in addressing blasphemy, defamation of religion and incitement to hatred

on grounds of religion. Freedom of religion or belief, the rights of minorities and freedom of expression are interdependent, as is the whole body of human rights norms. International human rights law primarily protects individuals in the exercise of their freedom of religion and not *per se* religions themselves. Balancing all aspects of human rights is an extremely delicate exercise, requiring neutral and impartial implementation. An independent judiciary is vital to ensure that hate speech is closely monitored and, in some cases, does not enjoy impunity while freedom of expression is not limited under the pretext of preventing hate speech.

13. Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights governs the existing legal framework relating to the intersection of freedom of expression and religious tolerance. It provides that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”. There is thus a careful distinction between forms of expression that constitute a criminal offence, forms of expression that are not criminally punishable but nevertheless may justify a civil suit when moral damages have been suffered by alleged victims and forms of expression that neither constitute a criminal offence nor entail civil reparation but still raise concern in terms of tolerance or respect for the religion of others. Many Muslims consider double standards are at play when measured against the reality of legal practice in Europe and North America: insult Muslims and it is exercising freedom of expression; insult others and it will be considered racist or anti-semitic. While eschewing state control of the media, should governments periodically ‘remind’ media of their responsibility to provide balanced, accurate and sensitive reporting? Self-regulatory media bodies could deal with instances of transgression.

14. Hate speech is undoubtedly a controversial notion, which is not found in the major international human rights instruments. Its definition is problematic, taking into account the protection sought is usually from non-state actors. Critics argue there is no evidence to suggest that censoring or banning expression has any impact on the existence of such views; others point out that certain kinds of hateful expression can threaten the dignity of the targeted individuals, and should be acted upon. While some advocate revising international and national legislation to include Islamophobia (which is itself problematic to define) as a specific hate crime, others believe the

issue is better approached through law preventing incitement to hatred on grounds of religion generally. Even on this basis, many consider legal intervention a delicate issue. Recent experience in the UK, when Muslims worked together with adherents of other religions to secure such provision, resulted in weaker safeguards than those initially sought. Advocates of this approach need to work closely with law-makers, and have detailed research and studies to support their arguments. Some argue that if Muslim communities in Europe are to be successful in securing what they regard as adequate legal protection for themselves, they must also speak out for the same rights for religious or other minorities in Muslim majority countries. Some others believe that the situation and problems of Muslims in Europe are a European matter and should be resolved without reference to the rights of religious and other minorities elsewhere.

15. The existing international legal framework could be strengthened by all states ratifying international human rights treaties and implementing their provisions. Regional human rights mechanisms also have a role to play since these are often more accessible for individuals in securing remedy. Such mechanisms are absent in Asia and the Middle East. Legal frameworks and institutions need to reflect their societies. Some, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, question whether recent judgments by the European Court of Human Rights on restrictions on women wearing the *hijab* are justifiable limitations of the right to manifest religion; they consider the Court's rulings in favour of government prohibitions of the *hijab* have failed to take account of the changing nature of European societies with sizeable Muslim communities. The rulings may have wide-reaching implications for public, and in some instances private sector employment of women who wish to wear the *hijab*. Moreover, in view of the direct applicability of much EU legislation in its member states, Muslims need to make their voices also heard in policy-making at the European level. National governments should consider supporting this. Muslim organisations across Europe should also be encouraged to meet periodically to exchange information and address common issues, for example the certification or training of Imams. Periodic contact among Muslim communities in Europe may also help to nurture new generations of leaders.

16. In line with the effective implementation of international and national legislation, governments need to adopt a multi-faceted approach in tackling Islamophobia. Clear criteria for reporting and registering hate crimes should be established. Given some victims' reluctance, or their difficulty in so doing, new methods, such as online mechanisms, should be created to help overcome this disadvantage. Some countries have developed national action plans to address discrimination against Muslims. Special bodies at national level, established by statute and independent of government, with specific responsibilities for promoting equal treatment, or monitoring discrimination, are often part of such national plans. Special training programmes are needed for law enforcement personnel. Governments should help build the capacity of Muslim communities and civil society organisations through outreach programmes to enable them to work with local or regional authorities, building their confidence in relating to these power structures and creating community cohesion. Educational and cultural strategies, such as art and other cultural exhibitions, are also needed in parallel to effective legal measures.

Role of media in feeding Islamophobia

17. Most agree that Western media coverage of Islam and the Muslim world could be more balanced and should be improved. It focuses almost exclusively on conflict, disasters or violence in the Middle East. When reporting a war in which the media's own country is involved, some media tend to become partisan. The views of moderate Muslim are not seen as newsworthy; conversely, disproportionate time and space is given to extremists. There is seldom coverage of Islam as a religion. Whether consciously or otherwise, journalists tend to treat Islam in secular terms. Muslims in Europe withdraw from contact with media as they do not believe reporting will be open-minded.

18. The involvement of more European Muslims in mainstream media would help counter this situation. Media should be more representative and diverse. Some argue that public broadcasting services should set an example by being more responsive to the full range of groups within societies which pay for them; others believe 'better media everywhere' are required. Media should give a more rounded view of Muslims, and coverage of their everyday lives as city counsellors, football fans or families should be better incorporated into popular drama and multimedia

generally. Non-Muslim journalists need more basic information about Muslims and their religion; the recently published handbook *British Muslims: Media Guide*³ represents good practice in this respect. Muslim organisations and representatives of Muslim communities in Europe could benefit from training on how to deal with media; becoming more 'media-savvy' in presenting arguments in concise, objective and unemotional terms can help meet the demand for media 'sound-bites'. The Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has some 80 local offices throughout the USA and has trained several thousand representatives of local Muslim communities in writing press releases and responding with facts about Islam to dispel prevailing myths. Muslims in Europe could similarly organise in this way to 'take charge' of their own image. Denunciation of violence or extremism that is frequently misattributed to Islam is also important for Muslim communities or organisations. Some contend that gaining media attention for this is far from easy. For example, a meeting hosted by King Abdullah of Jordan in July 2005 bringing together Muslim scholars and representatives from 45 countries denounced militancy and extremism in clear terms. Coinciding with the London bombings, the meeting was largely unreported abroad. Media should be closely monitored and reported. Some suggest that when there is negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam, 'naming and shaming' may provide an option which could include using consumer power to draw attention to the concerns. Newsrooms can be influenced by complaints.

Looking to the future

Improving the image of the West in Muslim majority societies and the image of Islam in the West

19. While discrimination, or lack of political economic and social opportunity for Muslims in Europe, influences the image of the West in Muslim majority countries, many Muslims consider the single most significant factor determining attitudes is Western foreign policy. Broadly stated, Western policy approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the recent election victory of Hamas, to Bosnia and Chechnya, intervention in Iraq, including the abuses at Abu Ghraib Prison, and in Afghanistan are all felt by many in the Islamic world to demonstrate inconsistency and bias in Western policies. Previous strong Western support for autocratic regimes in the

³ A joint publication of the British Council and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (UK), written by Ehsan Masood.

Middle East, while simultaneously speaking of universal human rights values, adds to the view that double standards have been exercised. To what extent are governments in the Islamic world treated as equals, or with reciprocity, rather than as 'pawns in high stake international power plays by Western governments'? In response, the argument is made that political and security considerations govern Western action in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, were the Islamic world to take more responsibility to address the conflicts and problems of bad governance in its own backyard there would be less need for others to do so. In this regard, some highlighted the OIC's new proactive approach in addressing conflicts and promoting human rights and good governance programmes for OIC member states, in line with the OIC Ten-Year Programme of Action⁴.

20. For many in the West, the Middle East represents Islam. Little account is taken of the fact that more Muslims live east of the Middle East region than in it and that there is a considerable indigenous Muslim population in South-eastern Europe. There is also scant recognition of the diversity of Muslim majority countries. Islam often conjures up images of authoritarian government, subjugation of women, cruel punishments of Shar'ia law, and violence in the popular Western mind. Such perceptions, some argue, are based on a lack of accurate information, misrepresentation and stereotyping.

21. Muslims and non-Muslims agree addressing the 'democratic deficit' in the Arab world, as identified in the *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, would substantially improve Islam's overall image. The poor democratic track record of some Muslim majority countries is at times attributed in the West to Islam, despite the belief of many that there is no normative impediment to democracy in Islam. It is more pertinent to point to certain structural features of a state, such as the close alignment of the military to the government, a rentier economy and underdevelopment which hamper viable democratic institutions. Some perceive a shift throughout the Middle East region, with much demand for representative and accountable institutions; some governments are committing themselves to political and other reforms. These governments should continue to follow through these

⁴ The OIC's Ten-year Programme of Action was adopted at its Third Extraordinary Islamic Summit held in December 2005.

commitments and implement them effectively. Western governments should attempt to support reforms in a consistent manner, in government and outside, although democratisation needs to be driven from within the region. Some underline the content and pace of reform will likely vary in line with the local conditions and specificities of each country.

22. Women's rights in Muslim majority countries vary widely. While universal suffrage has yet to be introduced throughout the Middle East, and in some countries women are discriminated against in both law and practice, there are nevertheless enterprising, educated and professional women, in productive employment, everywhere in the Muslim world. Women's non-governmental organisations and movements in many Muslim countries campaign for greater educational opportunities, better health services and the reform of laws which encode cultural attitudes and culture-specific interpretations of religious law, and thus form the basis for discrimination against women. Government support for these women's groups could help ameliorate their situation and do much to improve the image of the respective governments abroad.

23. A predominance of anti-western, sometimes extremist, preaching, literature and media, including on the internet, in some parts of the Muslim world, and acts of extremists and terrorists abusing Islam, create a misperception in the West that Muslims tolerate, if not condone, violence against non-Muslims. Islamic leaders, in their latest extraordinary summit, resolved to combat terrorism and extremism. UN Security Council Resolution 1624, adopted by world leaders at the time of the 2005 World Summit, calls inter alia on all governments "to take all measures ... to counter incitement of terrorist acts motivated by extremism and intolerance and to prevent the subversion of education, cultural and religious institutions by terrorists and their supporters". While all governments are required to report on their implementation of this resolution, firm action by some governments in the Islamic world would enhance their credibility in the West and inevitably lead to improvement in their relations with European countries.

24. The OIC Charter provides for the organisation to assist all members of the Ummah, the global community of Muslims including European Muslims. The OIC

Ten Year Programme of action mandates the OIC General Secretariat to protect the rights of Muslim minorities and communities in non-OIC member states by promoting close cooperation with the governments of the states hosting Muslim communities. Views differ among Muslims in Europe about the extent to which the governments of Muslim majority governments should seek to involve themselves in issues of integration of Muslim communities in Europe. At the same time, Muslim majority governments have contributed financially to the establishment of mosques and religious schools in Europe. Some suggest it would be useful for them to fund the construction of community centres and other social needs of Muslim communities in Europe, cooperating with European governments in this to the benefit of Muslim communities and their governments alike.

Conclusions

25. Urgent action and dialogue is needed by governments in both the West and in the Muslim world to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding or 'clash of ignorance' which has led to the rise of stereotyping of Muslims and non-Muslims and associated acts of intolerance and discrimination. Intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, civil society actors such as parliamentarians, the media, local communities and others all have a role to play.

26. In Europe, there is a need to strengthen efforts to promote greater understanding and awareness about religion and multiculturalism. In the Muslim world, endeavours should be made to dispel misperceptions about the West. Taking steps to promote democracy, human rights and good governance in the Muslim world, as called for in the OIC's Ten-year Programme of Action for its member states, is crucial. It should address issues which create a negative impact on the image of Islam and the Muslim world in Europe and beyond.

27. Europe is a community based on shared values, hinged on the belief that all persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law. It is multicultural in its past and present. Cultural diversity is an asset. To ensure it continues and the contributions of all components of society are valued, European governments need to increase interaction with Muslim communities and work in partnership with them; they should take measures to address the marginalisation of

some segments of their communities; and they should support dialogue and joint activities among different parts of society in order to counter stereotypes and prejudices. The developing role of Muslim civil society institutions, working in tandem with the wider NGO community, is key. Muslim communities throughout Europe must engage politically, socially and culturally. Their organisations should be supported and strengthened to become recognised voices of Muslim communities. Education to promote mutual understanding and respect also has a vital role to play in both Europe and the Muslim world.

28. Dialogue among civilisations, cultures and religions should be fostered as the only long-term way forward. To date, there is concern that there have been simultaneous monologues between the West and the Muslim world. Each needs to listen to the narrative of the other without influencing that narrative. Muslim communities in Europe can be valuable links in relations between the Muslim world and the West, informing both of the issues and challenges at stake. Dialogue should start anew with a clear agenda and objectives, and political engagement on all sides. Some suggest it is opportune to revive the OIC-EU Forum, launched in 2002. Consideration could be given to enlarging this type of cooperation mechanism to include the OSCE, and Council of Europe. It is of crucial importance that future dialogue involves more broadly the peoples of the Muslim world and the West so as to deliver practical and visible results for all.

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8 June 2006

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