

Anti-Islamic rhetoric sparks identity fears in Europe

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The spread of anti-Islamic rhetoric among European politicians for political gains is creating discrimination against Muslims in particular and fears of an identity loss in the mainstream population, says Ömür Orhun

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A senior official has cautioned against an increasing use of racist and anti-Islamic language both in the political arena and in [media outlets](#) in Europe, a development that stirs up frenzy against Muslims among ordinary people.

"This is very unfortunate development because ordinary people are very much affected by this political discourse in that they have an unfounded fear of losing their identity," [Ambassador](#) Ömür Orhun, personal representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, told the Turkish Daily News in an exclusive interview.

"For example, the small [Muslim community](#) in Denmark, which has a very good record of respecting human rights, was unfortunately seen as a threat to the so called Danish identity, which is not correct of course," he added.

Recent attempts by European politicians targeting Muslims and their religious symbols sparked concerns over an upsurge in racist tendencies. In May, members of a Swiss right-wing party launched a campaign to have the building of minarets banned, a move which has shocked Switzerland's 350,000 Muslims.

In the [Netherlands](#), a right-wing politician, Geert Wilders, caused controversy when he argued in a letter to a national newspaper early this month that the Koran must be banned in the country, which drew harsh criticism from even the Dutch government lambasting the politician for exceeding the boundaries of decency. Orhun emphasized that mainstream political parties resorted to anti-Islam rhetoric when they realized such campaigns against Muslims were playing well with voters.

"Unfortunately, this is a very serious development in European circles recently. In the past it was the far-right which was propagating anti-Islam sentiments but

mainstream political parties started to use the same rhetoric when they saw the votes the far-right gets," he said.

The media and political discourse is interlinked in this context, he added, because the politicians affect the media and they want to use it to propagate their policies.

"But media usually play into the hands of those who spread anti-Islam propaganda and the solution for this is of course not governmental control of the media but self-regulatory measures. Media should have self regulations within itself as the effect of the media should not be underestimated."

Contradicting moves in Europe

On one hand Europe gives positive signs in order to integrate their Muslim population by allowing them to take stand in political bodies and have authority in decision making mechanisms but on the other hand they take measures that prevent an eventual complete integration.

"The messages we receive and the developments we observe are contradicting in their entirety," Orhun said. He further added that all European countries recognized something must be done to eradicate so-called Islamophobia and take measures to integrate Muslim communities into the mainstream communities.

"For example, in Holland, Germany and France some members of the Muslim communities have been elected to legislative bodies and even some people of Muslim background have made it to cabinets, so these are good signs." While welcoming the two events in Germany, the Islamic [Conference](#) and Integration Summit, as hesitant but positive steps indicating the recognition by the German government that something must be done, he also underlined their shortcomings.

"There are also not so positive developments like the draft law in France which aims to restrict [immigration](#) and the new German law on migration which contains quite a number of clauses against internationally recognized [human rights](#) principles. These are developments that I follow with great concern."

Another source of concern for Muslims is a Swiss move to force a constitutional amendment forbidding minarets and possible legal changes that will have to be approved in a nationwide referendum, which will make the ban on building minarets binding.

"This is of course not acceptable. I have issued a statement saying that a country like Switzerland which preaches human rights to all countries should not be seen in a situation where it is discriminating against 10 percent of its population, which are

Muslims, and I said minarets are integral parts of mosques in the same way as bell towers are parts of churches and both churches and mosques are humanity's common heritage, so people should use their energies and time in more constructive and positive things rather than placing a [blanket](#) restriction on building minarets in a country," he said.

'Ignorance must be eradicated'

Orhun said misconceptions were prevalent on both sides about Islam and Christianity and that recent developments stemmed from ignorance, namely from not knowing about one another, which can only be eradicated through education.

"Education of mainstream communities including German, French, Dutch or American communities about [harmony](#), respect to the other, respect to other cultures and a sense of living together is very important. This also applies to Muslim communities who should be taught of the values of societies they are living in.

Secondly, for both sides education on world history and cultures is similarly important because there are misconceptions on both sides. For example, the recent suggestion in the Netherlands (on the ban of the Koran) is a very good example of this ignorance; so ignorance must be eradicated." The OSCE has been working on the issues of promoting tolerance and combating discrimination over the last six years. In this context, after organizing high level political conferences on these issues, the OSCE chairmanship in late 2004 appointed three personal representatives who are not employees of the OSCE but honorary personalities representing the OSCE chairman: Ambassador Orhun of the [Turkish](#) Foreign Ministry is Personal Representative of the OSCE chairmanship on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims; Gert Weisskirchen of Germany is Personal Representative on combating anti-Semitism; Anastasia Crickley of Ireland is Personal Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination.