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Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

Protecting and Promoting Human Rights and Human Dignity within the Context of Diversity

Different societies, cultures, and religions have their own interpretation of human rights. They also tend to correlate these differing interpretations with other values. In a global environment, ensuring peaceful coexistence, avoiding a clash of civilizations, and establishing dialogue and partnership becomes all the more difficult, but not impossible.

Responsibility for the preservation, continuation, and enhancement of constructive, peaceful, and forward-looking relationships within and among cultures, religions, and societies is shared by government agencies, religious and cultural communities, public and private organizations, civil society, and the media.

In light of the troubling events since 11 September 2001, the need for a genuine dialogue and interaction among religions and cultures remains high on the agenda of the international community. The current lack of dialogue and mutual trust is encouraging extremists to attempt to divide the international community along artificial cultural and religious fault lines. This has increasingly become a concern for the maintenance of international peace and stability. The need for a comprehensive and collective effort to counter this trend has therefore become more crucial than ever.

A genuine dialogue can only occur when there is real respect for and understanding of other cultures and religions. It would be a mistake to assume that any one culture is intrinsically more able to respond to basic human needs. In fact all cultures are cumulative, interactive, and progressive in nature. They form the common product of humankind.

As such, values including respect for human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and accountability are and should be essentially universal. No single culture can claim that these values are theirs alone. Instead, they are the product of mankind's collective wisdom, conscience, and progress. However, such values are not universally applied. The task, therefore, is to identify the roots of these values within our respective cultures and promote their collective ownership.

There is also a need to facilitate harmony, understanding, mutual respect, and dialogue by emphasizing the common values of different cultures and religions.

The globalized world of today with its high level of interdependence requires societies to understand one another in greater depth than ever before.

Employing cross-cultural skills that facilitate mutual understanding among societies has therefore become a condition for peaceful relations. Likewise, societies that have experienced multiculturalism are particularly well-placed to contribute to this objective. Their distinct social and historical experiences are conducive to cultivating and articulating cross-cultural skills that would be needed to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts of values. They can assist in avoiding stereotyping, in opposing animosity, and in preventing violence and extremism. They can also help to achieve the balance necessary to preserve the cultural identity of all segments of multicultural societies.

Our Present Environment

We are living in a world that is fundamentally different from that of the 20th century. Both the international system and people's concepts, attitudes, and expectations are changing.

How the future unfolds will depend on the choices we make and the path we follow. A reappraisal of how best to pursue our common vision and collective interests is called for now more than ever.

The last decade of the twentieth century was characterized by a sense of optimism fuelled by the spread of democracy and free markets, together with a strengthened emphasis on human rights and freedoms. However, we tended to forget that our world is a complex one and vulnerable to unforeseen developments. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and subsequent events have brutally demonstrated the extent to which extreme and violent groups may succeed in challenging the values of the civilized world. As well as the dramatic impact of these events on international relations and transatlantic links, it is also necessary to thoroughly and seriously examine their negative consequences in terms of the emergence of a climate of fear, suspicion, and unrest that has led to manifestations of discrimination and racism.

Within this context, it is a sad fact that the environment in which Muslims now live, especially in Western countries, has deteriorated considerably in the post-9/11 period. Muslims, together with some other minority and foreign groups, have faced intolerance, discrimination, distrust, and hostility.

So-called "Islamic terrorism" or "Islamic extremism" is portrayed as the source of all evil, which adds to existing intolerance and prejudice against Muslims. People are stigmatized because of their beliefs, ethnicity, or appearance.

This phenomenon has two additional adverse consequences:

First, it undermines efforts at integration and has a negative effect on attempts to create an atmosphere of harmony.

Second, an even wider fault line between the Muslim world and the Christian world may emerge.

Therefore, both from a micro-social angle and from a global perspective, it would be wise to put an end to such practices.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

The OSCE brings together 56 countries in the Euro-Atlantic-Asian area and, as such, is the largest regional international organization in existence. The OSCE's comprehensive approach to security includes "human security" as an important component. The common values of the OSCE are based on a firm commitment to human rights and on the recognition of the inherent dignity of all human beings.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms are recognized as essential safeguards of tolerance and non-discrimination, which are indispensable elements of stability, security, and co-operation.

However, despite all efforts to promote and protect human rights, racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and intolerance persist in many societies. The resurgence, especially after 11 September 2001, of racist tendencies, and, as underlined earlier, the emergence of Islamophobia challenge the exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms, particularly in a number of Western countries. In spite of tangible progress achieved in eliminating institutionalized forms of discrimination, OSCE countries are still experiencing new and growing waves of bias, exclusion, and racist violence. These constitute a major threat to friendly and peaceful relations, not only among states but also among peoples. Hence, the need to struggle against all forms and manifestations of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims has become more evident – and more urgent – than before.

Taking into account that violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as manifestations of hate, discrimination, and intolerance threaten stability and security in the OSCE area, OSCE participating States have undertaken numerous commitments to combat racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination, and intolerance, including against Muslims. However, much work remains to be done to foster democratic and pluralistic societies where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity is not only tolerated, but truly respected and valued.

As I mentioned earlier, promoting tolerance and combating discrimination have ranked high among the priorities of the OSCE in the past few years. The OSCE has organized tolerance implementation meetings on the topics of inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic dialogue; education to promote mutual respect and understanding; and hate crime data collection. During these meetings, good practices in implementation were highlighted and specific recommendations were made concerning areas where strengthened efforts are needed. Furthermore, the Ministerial Council Decision on "Combating Intolerance and Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect

and Understanding" tasked the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) with strengthening its early warning function to identify, report, and raise awareness of hate-motivated incidents and trends and provide recommendations and assistance to participating States, upon their request, in areas where a more robust response is needed.[1]

The main areas of ODIHR's activity are as follows:

Hate-motivated crimes and violent manifestations of intolerance: Hate crimes against Muslims involve the violent expression of prejudice that may take the form of assault, murder, threats, or property damage such as arson, desecration, or vandalism. Responding to hate crimes is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, most states lack accurate data about the nature and extent of such offences, which means that law enforcement and criminal justice agencies are not armed with the information needed to combat them. This is often compounded by an absence of legislation specifically on hate crimes, making it difficult to prosecute such cases.

Freedom of religion or belief: Across the OSCE region, many Muslims and Muslim groups face restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief. The problems that they face include discrimination against individuals in the workplace and when using public services, as well as defamation campaigns.

Education: Intolerance and violent manifestations of hatred against Muslims and persons perceived to be Muslims are on the rise across the OSCE region. In this context, schools are increasingly becoming the sites of racist and xenophobic attacks. Teachers are rarely prepared for the challenges posed by increasingly diverse societies; they lack the time and training and often cannot draw on any material when trying to promote tolerance and mutual respect. As a consequence, pupils may not get the opportunity to relate their own experience of discrimination to that of others, to understand how prejudice functions, to appreciate cultural differences, and to thoroughly study related subjects. OSCE participating States have undertaken commitments to develop methods and curricula for diversity education in order to effectively combat racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and discrimination against Muslims, thereby making education a focus of ODIHR's work on tolerance.

Just how widespread is the problem of discrimination against Muslims? How frequently are hate crimes committed? Where do they occur, and who are the victims? What steps are being taken by law enforcement agencies and by governments? Answers to such basic questions are needed before anyone can make a serious effort to combat hate in all its manifestations. For that reason, one of the most important aspects of ODIHR's work in this field is its

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1   Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Fourteenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council, 4 and 5 December 2006, Brussels, 5 December 2006, *Decision No. 13/06, Combating Intolerance and Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding*, MC.DEC/13/06 of 5 December, pp. 40-43, here: p. 43, at: http://www. osce.org/documents/mcs/2006/12/22565_en.pdf.

role as a collection point for relevant information, including statistics from states and police agencies, as well as examples of good practices from a wide variety of sources, including governmental and non-governmental organizations. ODIHR's report on "Challenges and Responses to Hate-Motivated Incidents", which was prepared in collaboration with civil society groups, thus marks a welcome first effort to provide a general overview of hate-motivated crimes and incidents in the OSCE region.[2]

The collection and analysis of such information has allowed ODIHR to identify where there are gaps in the implementation of OSCE commitments related to tolerance and non-discrimination. This knowledge is the foundation of all ODIHR activities in this field and has provided the basis for its ability to offer states and NGOs technical assistance, expert-to-expert training, and opportunities to exchange information and best practices. It has also provided the basis for the creation of regional partnerships and the development of strategies that recognize hate-motivated crimes and acts for what they are: namely, a problem that is not confined within state borders and which consequently demands a concerted international response.

In many cases, ODIHR's role has simply been to bring individuals and organizations together, as in the case of the two NGO round-table meetings that ODIHR and I organized in 2005 and 2006 on discrimination and intolerance against Muslims. In other cases, ODIHR has played a larger role in developing methodologies, conducting training, carrying out research, and writing and disseminating reports and publications.

The result is a collection of technical tools and assistance programmes that help governments, law enforcement agencies, and educators, as well as civil society in a broader sense, including organizations and concerned individuals, to combat intolerance and to promote the ideals of mutual respect and understanding.

Building on these activities, ODIHR intends to focus in the future on seven areas that will have a bearing on efforts to combat discrimination and intolerance against Muslims:

1. Monitoring, reporting, and following up on responses to hate-motivated crimes and incidents.
2. Educational activities to promote tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding.
3. Legislative assistance to collect and assess existing legislation that deals with crimes motivated by hate throughout the OSCE region.
4. Civil society capacity building.
5. Assistance for law enforcement and judicial officials in combating hate crimes.

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2   OSCE ODIHR, *Challenges and Responses to Hate-Motivated Incidents in the OSCE Region*, Warsaw, 12 October 2006, at: http://www1.osce.org/documents/odihr/2006/10/21496_en.pdf

6. Promoting freedom of religion or belief.
7. Developing the Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Information System to support particular user groups.

The Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims

Recognizing the necessity of more actively combating intolerance and discrimination, and in line with its comprehensive concept of security, the OSCE has recently initiated a series of activities to promote tolerance and non-discrimination and has organized major international conferences for the same purpose. Within the scope of the overall fight against discrimination and in the name of promoting tolerance, then Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Passy, also appointed three personal representatives at the end of 2004 to promote better co-ordination of activities related to this endeavour. These positions are part time and honorary. I was honoured to be given the portfolio of combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. My mandate was extended by subsequent Chairmanships.

My mandate as the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims is to promote the co-ordination of participating States' efforts to effectively implement OSCE decisions in the field of tolerance and non-discrimination, paying special attention to combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

My perception of issues concerning the implementation of my mandate can be summarized as follows:

1. The historical, cultural and psychological depth of the issue of discrimination and intolerance always needs to be taken into full consideration.
2. A sound normative framework to combat intolerance and discrimination both in the OSCE and in other international and national forums does exist; what is needed is to put this normative framework into full use.
3. There is also a need for an intellectual and ethical strategy to avoid political exploitation of issues related to discrimination and intolerance.
4. Discrimination and intolerance against Muslims is not only a matter of discrimination against a specific religious group but also deeply affects international relations and the internal stability of Western societies. As such, it is a multifaceted question and must be addressed through a holistic approach.
5. Various forms of intolerance and discrimination need not be subject to an artificial hierarchy. Discrimination is discrimination and must be condemned and dealt with whatever the underlying motive might be.

Efforts to deal with different forms of discrimination should therefore strengthen each other.

6. The following points must be stressed:

   a) The quality of life of Muslims living in Western societies must be improved. This will lead to better understanding and better integration, which will help to reduce mistrust.

   b) Muslims should not be seen as second-class citizens, and must not be demonized, marginalized, feared, or despised.

   c) The war on terror must not become a war on Muslims.

   d) It should be recognized that Muslims have the same basic needs and desires as others: material well-being, cultural acceptance, and religious freedom without political or social intimidation. In that vein, Muslims should not be marginalized or forced to assimilate. Rather, they should be accommodated. Accommodation is the best strategy for integration.

I also try to raise awareness of the necessity of tolerance and non-discrimination; to stress the importance of social harmony and respect, especially respect for "the other", whoever this other may be; to search for commonalities rather than divisions; and to promote inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

My other priorities include stressing the need for sound legal strategies, a sound legal framework, and the implementation of that framework (judicial measures); underlining the need for education, not only of law enforcement officials but especially of the younger generation; and highlighting good practices and the role of the media.

In the course of my work to raise awareness of discrimination and intolerance against Muslims, I visited the Netherlands, the USA, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, and Spain, accepting invitations extended by the governments of these countries. During these visits, I met not only high-level representatives of government and the state, but also leaders of relevant institutions and, more importantly, large segments of the civil society. My activities during these visits, together with my findings, comments, and recommendations, have been reported to the OSCE participating States through the Chairmanship. I also attended all relevant OSCE events on tolerance and discrimination and elaborated on my views at these meetings.

Together with ODIHR, I organized two Muslim NGO round-table meetings, with the active participation of quite a number of civil society representatives. The recommendations that emerged in these meetings were compiled in substantial reports. These meetings were also instrumental in helping to create a database of relevant NGOs, as Muslim NGOs are not so very well organized or represented in international forums.

I also represented the OSCE at various conferences, workshops and symposia, where I delivered statements elaborating upon my mandate, activities, perceptions, and recommendations.

To keep the OSCE Permanent Council up to date on my activities and opinions, I report to it twice a year both in writing and in person, responding to comments and questions raised.

All in all, I believe my activities have raised the OSCE's profile and have contributed to a better understanding of the need to combat intolerance and discrimination against Muslims.

A Conceptual Approach to Tolerance and Non-Discrimination

Today, we all seem to agree that democracy is the best form of government. It is worth remembering what the fundamental and indispensable elements of democracy are:

- tolerance of differences and freedom of expression, thought and belief, which are the basis of creativity and development;
- participation, which bolsters the awareness of common responsibility;
- solidarity, which is complementary to civic identity; and finally
- transparency, which enables togetherness in solving problems without ignoring differences of opinion.

We must learn to appreciate our differences and to respect others. Differences should not lead to discrimination.

Like individuals, nations and societies act in their perceived best interests; however, they should understand that bridging the gaps between divergent interests is the key to building resilient and cohesive societies.

Nowadays we are also witnessing increasing demands for stronger action against racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and related intolerance, including discrimination against Muslims. Many international organizations, NGOs, and governments are paying particular attention to the question of tolerance and non-discrimination with regard to Muslims. These efforts are welcome, but as long as the root of the sickness is not reached, they are bound to remain either totally ineffective or only temporarily effective.

It is a well-established fact that the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination are at the centre of the human rights system. These principles are also closely linked to the concept of mutual respect. Mutual respect, for its part, is based on equality in dignity as well as equality in benefiting from human rights.

Disregard of the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination leads to the dismantling of peaceful, secure, and stable societies and harms inter-state relations. Democracy and the protection of fundamental freedoms and human

rights, on the other hand, are essential safeguards of tolerance and non-discrimination.

However, more and more people seem to have started to believe that a clash of civilizations is inevitable and that "the others" have to change their values if we are to live together in peace. This attitude threatens the international environment and creates a vicious circle. The widening gap between the parties puts them on a path of confrontation rather than one of co-operation, while a lack of dialogue and collaboration bolsters existing prejudices and thus increases the distance between the sides.

In this situation, humankind must join forces to resist all attempts to play one culture off against the other, to assert the supremacy of any single culture or religion, or to propagate a "clash of civilizations". Such ideologies would soon lead to a conflict in which everybody could only lose. And they prevent us from finding joint solutions to the problems facing us all.

It is therefore vital that all the countries of the East and the West come to share a vision of free, tolerant, and just societies where people of different cultural and religious backgrounds can live in peace and respect each other.

What can be done to promote tolerance and combat discrimination against Muslims?

- We can and we must speak out swiftly, clearly, and forcefully against intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and other vulnerable groups. By doing so, we will be helping to protect our fellow citizens from hate-filled segments of society.
- We can and we must condemn those who discriminate in word or deed.
- In this regard, state authorities have a special responsibility to protect their citizens. They must see to it that tolerance and non-discrimination are not in short supply.
- Declaratory statements are of course welcome, but they are not enough. We must put into practice what we preach. In other words, we must not only share the same basic values, we must also act in line with this conviction.

Identity

In our present environment, I notice a tendency by many people in different parts of the Western world to underline their national, ethnic, religious, local, and cultural identities in a more pronounced manner. Since the end of the Cold War, in particular, the emphasis on ethnic and religious identities is becoming more visible. And this emphasis leads to an increase in nationalist tendencies.

In this context, we have to recognize that ethnic and religious identity is only one element of societal structures and political cultures. At the same

time, the concept of identity is not a static one, but is changeable according to circumstances, as content and meaning are subject to constant re-evaluation and evolution.

Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration here is increasing social mobility. People are moving not only from rural areas to urban centres, but also from one country to another, mainly in search of a better life. This mobility, especially of the cross-border variety, creates apprehension among autochthonous peoples that they may lose their traditional identity as a result of the increasing influx of people representing "alien" cultures, ethnicities, and religions. People of divergent backgrounds have to live together (or side by side) and share the same space. This leads to friction and even conflicts.

I think this situation adds to the intolerance and discrimination we see in many segments of our societies.

According to reliable surveys, there is a growing tendency to identify oneself with the national and/or religious characteristics of the mainstream. Thus, a competition between the feelings of the mainstream and the expectations of the newcomers becomes inevitable. The newcomers, who are mostly vulnerable minorities, want to stick to their original identificational traits, while the majority wants them to assimilate, losing their existing identity.

Harmony and Respect

As the joint forum held in Istanbul by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the EU acknowledged, history has shown that a lack of knowledge and mutual respect among religions and cultures greatly affects world stability and peace. On the other hand, harmony and well-being are nurtured when different peoples make communication a priority, taking the time to talk and to listen to each other's views and interests, acknowledging and tolerating differences while seeking out commonalities that can help build strong relationships that promote co-operation.

The tragic events of September 11 and their repercussions have shown once again the need to strengthen tolerance and understanding among different cultures to avoid the reappearance of deeply rooted prejudices. Acts of terrorism cannot be explained or justified for political, religious, cultural, or any other reasons. There is now also a growing consciousness of the need for all sides to discuss and to attempt to better understand the differences in each other's perceptions, values, and interests, as well as to promote tolerance and appreciation of cultural diversity.

In our deliberations on protecting and promoting the values shared by different cultures and enhancing tolerance, dialogue, and co-operation within

and among nations and peoples, it might be useful to remember the conclusions of the OIC-EU Forum:

-   Cultures, in their diversity, complement and enhance one another. We must, therefore, confirm our conviction of the necessity of harmony among cultures and civilizations and the attainability of this harmony.
-   The main means to support coherence and solidarity and to avoid racial, religious and cultural prejudices is to enhance our knowledge of one another through communication and co-operation for the promotion of common universal values, such as those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant international human rights instruments. To this end, all political entities have a joint responsibility to contribute to the achievement of these goals.
-   We must reaffirm that terrorism cannot be justified for any reason whatsoever. Also, we must recognize the joint responsibility to fight terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.
-   We must be committed to defining problems emerging from cultural prejudices and political and economic injustices and to promoting solutions that will contribute to universal peace, welfare, and stability.
-   We must accept the need for further co-operation. For that, existing frameworks, both bilateral and also multilateral, must continue to be utilized.[3]

Islamophobia

Islamophobia needs but lacks a commonly agreed definition. It has often been defined as "fear or suspicion of Islam, Muslims, and matters pertaining to them". I think this is rather narrow. I prefer to use the term "intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and Islam", in line with the OSCE's definition.

Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. There are historical, cultural/ religious, and psychological reasons behind it.

However, as I underlined earlier, in the post-September 11 period, this phenomenon has acquired a new and disturbing dimension, and the social climate facing Muslims, especially in Western countries, has deteriorated. As a result, pre-existing prejudices and discriminatory tendencies against Muslims have become strengthened.

Islamophobia is a source of hate crime and as such generates fear, feelings of stigmatization, marginalization, and rejection. The net result is heightened anxiety and rising violence. Hate crime fuelled by Islamophobia is also an assault on people's identity and their human dignity.

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3   Cf. The OIC-EU Joint Forum, Press Release, 13 February 2002, at: http://www.belgenet. com/arsiv/ab/iko-ab-05e.html.

We have also noticed a disturbing recent increase in the proportion of violence targeting people, as opposed to violence targeting or involving only property.

To summarize the points mentioned so far, the key elements in the discrimination and intolerance against Muslims today are:

a) ancient hatreds, old prejudices,
b) powerful new opposition to immigration,
c) antipathy towards Muslims in general, and a belief that Islam is not compatible with democracy, human rights, and contemporary values,
d) political rhetoric, coupled with biased and/or misleading media coverage,
e) identification of terrorism and violence with Islam.

At this stage, an analysis of the problems encountered by Muslims in the West might be in order.

Structural problems include poor or non-existent formal relations between the state and the Muslim communities; a lack of proper knowledge of the language of the country of residence; a shortage of decent housing; and deficits in education leading to unequal access to the labour market (which creates a vicious circle). The net result of this situation is a sense of rejection, stigmatization, and marginalization that leads to lack of confidence in the state. People thus affected are also more prone to participate in illegal activities and more susceptible to radical propaganda.

Problems relating to non-Muslims' perception of Muslims and their behaviour towards Muslims include prejudice (which also affects those wrongly perceived to be Muslims); negative sentiments and the display of such sentiments; misrepresentation in the media, and Islamophobia in political discourse – especially by the far right, but recently also by moderates.

The lack of reliable monitoring makes it hard to be exact on the issue of discriminatory practices. In some countries, for instance, only discrimination related to race is monitored. Nonetheless, a striking example of discrimination is the issue of loyalty tests (or "conscience tests") required mainly of Muslims who wish to acquire citizenship, as, for example, in some German *Länder*. As mentioned above, housing and employment are two major areas where discrimination occurs. An example is the practice of not even considering Muslim-sounding names for job interviews. Further cases include a lack of proper places of worship and burial facilities; a headscarf ban in restaurants and other such public places; police practices related to search and arrest procedures; customs entry procedures, etc.; and harassment, vandalism, and violent attacks on persons only because they are Muslims or perceived as such.

What to Do?

Before examining what is being done to deal with this serious human rights issue, as befits my mandate, I would like to first consider what should be done and then to look at good practices in this area.

First, the countries of Europe and North America need to recognize the problem and be ready and willing to adopt a multifaceted approach.

Second, they need to take account of the importance of the intellectual front in the fight against intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and to devise sound strategies to tackle the issue in the areas of value systems and perceptions.

Third, they must define hate crimes broadly and address the information deficit, that is to say, collect, analyse, and disseminate information related to hate crimes.

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

Sixth, Western countries should help to strengthen Muslim communities and civil society organizations and try to enable them to work with local and national authorities. In this respect, community outreach programmes will be of great use in confidence building and in creating community cohesion and a sense of living together.

Another point that deserves the most urgent attention is education. Younger generations, in particular, should be provided with educational programmes that will foster tolerance, understanding, and respect towards "the other." Another education-related area is of course the training of law enforcement officials.

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

1. Political rhetoric: Responsible politicians, in both government and opposition, must underline the importance of accurate 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 for all must be voiced.
2. The media: The media can play a very positive role in promoting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony. This is what is expected of responsible journalism. On the other hand, the media may also play a very negative and divisive role in projecting false and inaccurate messages. Therefore, with due respect to the freedom of expression,

governments can assist or encourage the creation of self-regulatory media bodies to deal with manifestations of discrimination and racism.

Finally, on the matter of integration policies, the more Muslim communities feel at home and are truly integrated into 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, stigmatized, and rejected.

It is argued, and rightly so, that Europe has not been successful in its efforts at integration. While the objective was to create multicultural societies, the result has been the creation of parallel, mutually exclusive societies. How can this situation, which can also be characterized as cultural ghettos for Muslims, be remedied? I believe civic and structural integration is the answer: Muslim migrants must have a sense of being part of the larger community in which they live, they need to take part in all aspects of life, and to participate in general societal decision-making processes. In other words, we need to create 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 Muslim communities, on the other hand, must shoulder their share of the burden, adopt the civic values of their new societies, and distance themselves from radicalism, violence, and terrorism. Such an attitude will assist in dispelling misunderstandings, leading to respect for diversity.

The real threat to tolerance and to multicultural 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 learn or understand or accept the diversity that characterizes Western societies.

Good Practices

As I see it, the confusion in the minds of governments, politicians, and the public in general on how to deal with Islamophobia in the sense of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and Islam has not yet been completely cleared.

Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that there is growing awareness of the existence of the problem and the need to overcome it, but a coherent and over-arching policy has not yet been devised, let alone implemented.

All the points I tried to underline earlier when dealing with what should be done need to be put into a sound framework to be implemented. As things stand, we are far from achieving this.

However, this observation does not imply that nothing has been done. Here, I would like to try to illustrate some good practices that were brought to my attention during the country visits that I conducted.

1. Almost every country has some kind of legislation to deal with racism and discrimination, but not with Islamophobia as such. It would be advisable to review existing laws, to try to standardize them, and to include Islamophobia as a specific hate crime.
2. Some European countries have developed national action plans to deal with discrimination against Muslims. These are commendable. They should be fully implemented and their results should be reported.
3. Some countries have established special bodies under names such as equal treatment commissions, monitoring Centres on racism and xenophobia, community relations departments, councils for Muslim worship, councils for integration, independent bodies against discrimination, cohesion and faith units, commissions on integration and equal rights, or faith communities capacity building funds. These initiatives are also commendable, although most of them are of a general nature and do not aim to address Islamophobia specifically. It goes without saying that the key issue is whether they function effectively.
4. There is also growing recognition of the necessity to engage with Muslim communities and to help them develop their own capacities. In this regard, there has been increasing interaction with Muslim civil society organizations, and the OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, which was hosted by the Spanish OSCE Chairmanship in Cordoba on 9-10 October 2007, was a welcome further initiative.
5. Governments, at least at the level of rhetoric, seem to accept notions such as respect for religious values, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and harmony, the value of education, and the need for strong political leadership. I hope these will not remain rhetorical statements, but will be put into practice.
6. Finally, the intense debate revolving around how true integration can be achieved is a healthy first step. My sincere wish is that the next step will not lead to even more restrictive policies, but to true structural and civic integration.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that, while 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 to reach out across the barricades that exist or that some want to place between the Muslim world and the West. In that regard, the role to be played and the work to be done by civil society organizations is of the utmost importance in lifting these barricades by helping to initiate a sound dialogue.