

STATEMENT

*By the OSCE CiO Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and
Discrimination against Muslims Amb.A.Akhmetov*

Chairman!
Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great pleasure to be with you at this high-level meeting today.

I was appointed to the mandate of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in June, 2009 by the OSCE Chairperson – in - Office.

This year in this capacity I have participated 3 fora on inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue:

one in Astana (Kazakhstan) in July;

the second in Krakow (Poland) in September;

the third in Geneva (Switzerland) September 30-October 1, and in accordance with my mandate I also attended the Human Dimension Implementation meeting in Warsaw held this fall.

Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, which is sometimes called as Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, make up a great challenge to our democracies and social cohesion, as well as threatens international peace and security.

On the other hand the problem of ‘hate crimes’ against Muslims across OSCE participating States sometimes is a problem imposed on vulnerable minorities by those in power. Hate is being sown from above, and in discussing how to deal with that, we have to start not with the perpetrators of physical acts of violence – mainly poor people from poor neighbourhoods - but the instigators of hostility in the engine rooms of power.

The campaigns taking place all across OSCE participating States against mosques, Islamic schools and cultural meeting places are systematic and organised. Many are led – or supported – by elected politicians from powerful anti-immigration parties that are daily allowed to promote Islamophobia in the name of freedom of speech, while freedom of speech for Muslims is denied.

Unfortunately, various surveys and human rights reports indicate that despite of all efforts of participating States to promote and protect human rights for every one, acts related to racist and xenophobic attitudes, in particular, those targeting Muslims, persist in many parts of the OSCE region.

However, anti-Muslim prejudices and negative stereotypes are centuries old, the international community has very recently recognized it as a specific form of intolerance and called on the States take preventive and responsive measures. That is

why it is very important that OSCE intensifies its efforts to raise awareness of this phenomenon.

The acts of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims are driven by a combination of racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance, specifically hostility towards Islam and its adherents. Therefore, in practice, it is difficult, if not possible, to draw a clear-cut line between issues of intolerance 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.

There are several observable trends across the OSCE region in relation to intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. For instance, Muslims in political discourse and media are very often portrayed as a threat to the security and cultural identity of some participating States. In this regard, Islam is represented not as religion but a political ideology, which is incompatible with the principles of democracy and human rights. Muslims are quite frequently accused of not willing to integrate into the society. This has led to the adoption of some assimilation policies, which in some cases aimed at restricting cultural and religious expression. One of the extreme forms of these policies is discriminatory administrative obstacles or even attempts to adopt laws, which prevent building of minarets.

Some anti-terrorism measures, partially influenced by the prevailing negative stereotypes and prejudice, have had disproportional impact on the enjoyment of civil and political rights by individuals with Muslim background. In particular, the racial profiling, including stop and search measures targeting only Muslims, surveillance of mosques and charities, and no fly lists, has not only violated fundamental freedoms of many people, but also reinforced already existing climate of intolerance against a particular group of people.

Another observable trend is the increase of hate crimes against Muslims, which should be taken into account in the context of general climate of intolerance. As the upcoming ODIHR annual hate crime report indicates several hate crimes against Muslims were committed during 2008 in many participating States. In spite of this, there are still very few States, collecting and maintaining data on hate crimes against Muslims. ODIHR also underlines that civil society organizations dealing with intolerance against Muslims have very limited capacity to regularly monitor and report anti-Muslim hate crimes. According to another report issued by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, hate crimes against Muslims are grossly underreported and non-registered. In order to address this situation, I urge participating States to improve their hate crime data collection mechanism and benefit from ODIHR's Law Enforcement Officers Training Programme on Hate Crimes as much as possible.

Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims have devastating affects not only on the daily lives of the Muslim communities, but also on the society where they live. Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims leads to demarcation and creation of tensions in the society. To remedy this negative and disturbing phenomenon, sound strategies and educational approaches must be developed and vigorously implemented. For this purpose, I encourage the participating States to benefit from the experience and assistance of ODIHR in developing educational tools to counter specific forms of intolerance.

Increasing understanding and respect for cultural and religious diversity would be the first step in identifying criteria for good practices in combating intolerance and discrimination. My recommendations are the following:

1. It should be acknowledged that intolerance against Muslims is not a problem of a specific minority, but a human rights problem concerning everyone.
2. The historical, cultural and psychological depth of the issue of discrimination and intolerance always needs to be taken into full consideration.
3. There is also a need for an intellectual and ethical strategy to avoid political exploitation of the issues related to discrimination and intolerance.
4. 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. Within this framework, there should be synergy in efforts dealing with different forms of discrimination.
5. Integration policies should address the social and economic needs of Muslims in the countries that they are residing. Such policies should promote integration through participation, not assimilation. This will lead to better understanding and better integration, thus to lessening of mutual mistrust.
6. Fight against terrorism should be conducted with in the line of the internationally recognized human rights standards. This would increase partnership and cooperation between Muslim communities and security officers and contribute to the prevention of radicalization which may lead to violence.
7. Senior government leaders should send immediate, strong, public, and consistent messages that violent crimes which appear to be motivated by prejudice and intolerance against Muslims will be investigated thoroughly and prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

8. Recognizing the particular harm caused by violent hate crimes, governments should enact laws that establish specific offenses or provide enhanced penalties for violent crimes against Muslims.
9. Governments should ensure that those responsible for hate crimes against Muslims are held accountable under the law, that the enforcement of hate crime laws is a priority for the criminal justice system, and that the record of their enforcement is well documented and publicized.
10. Governments should maintain official systems of monitoring and public reporting to provide accurate data for informed policy decisions to combat violent hate crimes against Muslims. Such systems should include anonymous and disaggregated information on bias motivations and/or victim groups, and should monitor incidents and offenses, as well as prosecutions.
11. Governments should conduct outreach and education efforts to Muslim communities and civil society groups to reduce fear and assist victims, advance police-community relations, encourage improved reporting of hate crimes to the police and improve the quality of data collection by law enforcement bodies.
12. Members of parliament and local government leaders should be held politically accountable for bigoted words that encourage discrimination and violence and create a climate of fear for minorities, including Muslims.
13. Governments should support and strengthen the mandates of intergovernmental organizations that are addressing discrimination—like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the Fundamental Rights Agency, UN Alliance of Civilizations Initiative and Organization of Islamic Conference —including by encouraging such organizations to raise the capacity of and train police, prosecutors, and judges, as well as other official bodies and civil society groups to combat violent hate crimes.

Thank you for your attention!