

**ACTIVITIES OF THE
ORGANIZATION OF
THE ISLAMIC CONFERENCE (OIC)
ON COMBATING
DEFAMATION OF THE RELIGIONS**

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Introduction

Final Document of the World Summit 2005 (adopted in Resolution 60/1, on 24 October 2005) emphasized the responsibilities of all States, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations (Articles 13b, 55c), to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to **race, colour, sex, language or religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status**, and acknowledged the importance of **respect** and understanding for **religious and cultural diversity** throughout the world.

Similarly, the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance adopted in September 2001 the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

The Final Communiqué of the Third Extraordinary Session of the Islamic Summit Conference, held in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, on 7-8 December 2005, expressed serious concern at rising discrimination against Muslims and stressed the responsibility of all governments to ensure full respect for all religions.

The Human Rights Council issued various resolutions (the most recent ones: 4/9 & 4/10 of 30/3/2007) on the matter based on the reports by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in particular, “Combating defamation of religions” (A/HRC/4/50), and the reports by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

The UN General Assembly adopted resolutions on Combating Defamation of Religions (A/RES/61/164 of 19 Dec. 2006 and A/RES/60/150 of 16 Dec. 2005). Operative paragraph 6 of the most recent one, A/RES/61/164, is particularly important from the point of view of the theme of this present conference; because it:

“Deplores the use of the print, audio-visual and electronic media, including the Internet, and any other means to incite acts of violence, xenophobia or related intolerance and discrimination against Islam or any other religion”.

While there have been many praiseworthy initiatives to bring together the international community, including the EU-OIC Forum of 2002, Dialogue Among Civilizations, Alliance of Civilizations and various inter-faith dialogue attempts, actually most of which were initiated and participated by the OIC Member States.

In other words, the issue has been on the agenda of the international community for quite long time, and the present paper aims to summarise the activities of the OIC on the matter.

Efforts of the OIC

Wilton Park Conference

The OIC General Secretariat took an initiative and organized a conference focusing on Islamophobia in the United Kingdom (UK) in cooperation with the prestigious Wilton Park institution on 2-3 May 2006. This constituted the first-ever event initiated and organized by the OIC General Secretariat in the West on Islamophobia. Representatives of some of the OIC and European governments, and of international organizations such as UN, Council of Europe, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), European Union, academicians, media representatives, as well as Muslim organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Europe were among the participants. The Conference was opened by the Statement of the OIC Secretary General Prof. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and also addressed by the British Minister of State, Mr. Kim Howells.

The participants agreed that stereotyping has been on the rise and has led to incitement of hatred, discrimination and intolerance targeting dignity of human beings as individuals and as followers of faiths and value systems. They emphasized that urgent steps need to be taken to address the negative consequences of stereotyping and urged the governments and all actors of civil society intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, as well as communities - to take responsibility for coordinated action. These efforts would supplement the efforts made through bilateral contacts and the actions being taken in the United Nations.

The participants also agreed that dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions should be fostered and there is a need to enhance efforts to promote greater understanding and awareness about religion. In the Muslim world, endeavours have to be made to dispel misperceptions about the West and to promote democracy, human rights and good governance. In this regard, Conference participants encouraged the OIC to implement its 10-year program of action to promote human rights, social justice and good governance within the OIC countries.

Developments with regard to relations with the EU

As for cooperation with the EU, in September 2006, OIC-EU Ministerial Troikas Meeting was held in New York, upon the initiative of Finland as the EU term President, during the UN General Assembly. Continuation of these Meetings in a regular format in the form of political consultations is deemed useful. It is hoped that in September 2007 Portugal will take a similar initiative as the EU term President. In line with the relevant Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) resolution, the OIC Secretariat officially approached the President of the EU Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium in January 2007 to open an office in Brussels to develop ties of cooperation with the EU.

Meanwhile, it was a welcomed development that Slovenia which will take over the Presidency of the EU in the first part of 2008 has declared that intercultural dialogue will be among the first four priorities of its EU Presidency and has accordingly set up a Task Force to implement the "European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008" program. The Centre for European Perspective will play the supporting role in

Slovenia's preparation in this regard. Additionally, Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs has invited the OIC Secretary General to Ljubljana before or during the Slovenian EU Presidency to discuss possible joint projects.

Furthermore, it is being recalled that the EU Ministerial Council of 28 February 2006, cited the OIC among the organizations that the EU should cooperate to foster an atmosphere of dialogue and tolerance.

Developments with regard to the cooperation with the OSCE

The OSCE General Secretariat based in Vienna and OSCE's democratization and human rights centre, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), based in Warsaw, Poland are prominent among the western intergovernmental institutions with which the OIC General Secretariat established a high level of cooperation on the subject matter in the last two years. The exchange of visits between the Secretaries General of the OIC and the OSCE, as well as mutual invitations to Ministerial and other Conferences and particularly, exemplary level of cooperation of Ambassador Omur Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims with the OIC General Secretariat have contributed to the creation of a very positive ground for the further development of ties of cooperation between the OIC and the OSCE. In this context, the decision of Spain to organize in Cordoba in October 2007, in its capacity as the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, a conference specifically on Islamophobia is an important development.

Alliance of Civilizations

It has been observed by the OIC General Secretariat that the Turkish and Spanish joint initiative of Alliance of Civilizations has gained prominence in the international fora following the fact that it came under the UN auspices and that the new UN Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki Moon is attaching importance to this project as much as his predecessor Mr. Kofi Annan. With the establishment of a permanent Secretariat of Alliance of Civilizations at the UN Headquarters in New York, release of the Report of the High Panel and appointment by the UN Secretary General of former Portuguese President Mr. Jorge Sampaio as the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, elaborations on an implementation process will start. The OIC Secretariat is studying the Report of the High Panel and will be willing to cooperate with the High Representative Sampaio as well as the Alliance of Civilizations Secretariat in developing a bilateral work program.

Media Aspect/Baku Media Conference

The role of the Media is one of the most important factors in combating discrimination and intolerance to Muslims and Islam. In the form of either a print media or an electronic one, or computer games or movie films, it has the potential of creating huge impact on human psyche while disseminating information on discrimination and intolerance. Media again is the only possible tool to counter the negative propaganda.

With this understanding, an International Conference organized jointly by the Government of Azerbaijan and the OIC General Secretariat under the title of “The Role of Media in the Development of Tolerance and Mutual Understanding” in Baku Azerbaijan on 26-27 April 2007.

In addition to the high level personalities and officials from various parts of the world, representatives of the UN, Council of Europe, OSCE, EU and UNESCO, academicians, media experts and journalists discussed the challenges of promoting dialogue through mass media, ways to effect and expand mutual understanding, education and universal values as essential tools for spreading tolerance and mutual understanding, and the agenda of pursuing dialogue worldwide.

During the deliberations of the Conference, the participants concurred that Media could and should play a constructive role in fostering tolerance and understanding among different cultures and civilizations, as well as in combating prejudices and bridging the gap rather than widening differences. The participants emphasized the importance of unbiased teaching of history, objective reporting and responsible political discourse in fostering culture of tolerance and promoting mutual understanding. They concluded that freedom of speech is one of the fundamental freedoms; however it should be linked with a sense of responsibility on the part of the party who is exercising this freedom. While the role of education in fostering understanding and creating awareness and sensitivity about cultures and civilizations was particularly highlighted, linking any particular religion, in particular, as is the case recently, Islam to terrorism by Media was rejected and an appeal was made to the Media institutions to refrain from utilizing phrases linking Islam and Muslims with terrorism, as terrorism does not have any religion.

Various contacts of the OIC Secretary-General

The OIC Secretary-General Prof. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu participated in the High level Segment of UN Human Rights Council Meeting in Geneva in February this year and met with the Secretary-General of the United Nations Mr. Ban Ki Moon on the sidelines of Arab League Summit held in Riyadh at the end of March 2007. During the meeting, the two Secretaries-General held intensive discussions on the dangerous implication of the issue of defamation of Islam on global peace and security. They agreed that all possible actions must be taken to raise global awareness on the need for understanding and tolerance among faiths and there must be accepted mechanism and joint action programs adopted by the international community to address avoidable provocations and incitement, and end discrimination against Muslims and cooperate towards effective and meaningful dialogue among civilizations.

The OIC Secretary-General’s initiative in meeting Heads of Government and the political leadership in the Western World, including his meetings with Heads of State/Government, Foreign Ministers and the political leadership of many European countries such as UK, France, Austria, Netherlands, Spain, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and heads of International Organizations such as UN, OSCE, EU and the Council of Europe, participation by the General Secretariat in conferences and workshops on interfaith dialogue and tolerance issues have generated a constructive dialogue, and contributed to the overall efforts towards peace and tolerance.

Conclusion

The European Union Monitoring Center Report of 2006, entitled 'Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia' noted that efforts to protect human rights values such as freedom of expression may at times clash with the perceptions of religious duties of certain individuals or faith groups. However, this perspective is of fundamental importance and EU Member States have a positive duty under international human rights law to protect and promote these values, while ensuring that a potential critical stance towards certain attitudes of other groups in society respects the principle of equal treatment.

Concerning the protection of international human rights, the Report of the UNHCHR on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance provided that the concept of the clash of civilizations and religions is becoming increasingly widespread in the thinking and rhetoric of the political, intellectual and media elite, and which is manifested in the refusal of diversity, a dogmatic rejection of multiculturalism and a defence of identity based on intangible 'values'.

OIC supports the resolution on 'Combating Defamation of Religions' (A/HRC/4/L.12) adopted at the Fourth Session of the UN Human Rights Council held in Geneva. This resolution is a major step towards sensitizing the international community on the serious impact of defamation of religions and the urgent need for cooperation of all to address the issue.

The OIC believes that there is a need to draft a 'Convention on the Elimination of Religious Discrimination and Intolerance' and to set up a Committee to implement and monitor it. This should take into consideration the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief Proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 36/55 of 25 November 1981 and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities adopted by General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992.

OIC Secretariat supports the recommendation of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance to establish, within the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, a **Centre** for monitoring racist and xenophobic phenomena similar to the European Monitoring Centre on the same.