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Preventing and responding to anti-Muslim hate crimes

The problem of ‘hate crimes’ against Muslims across western Europe is a problem that has been unleashed 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 Europe 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.

One of the aims of this Session is to ‘combat the lack of information and data’ on this subject. But I ask myself how much more information do we need?

Let me just give you one statistic, from Switzerland, Here, the Stop Minaret movement, backed by the Swiss People’s Party, which believes that Islamic values are incompatible with Christian ideals and Swiss democracy, gathered together the signature of 100,000 people to back its petition against minarets and force a national referendum on the issue.

Let me give you another piece of data. The Institute of Race Relations’ in January 2009 produced a document which detailed at least 50 campaigns against Muslims, and other vulnerable minorities. These included threatening phone calls against prominent Muslims in Austria. These threats came after the Freedom Party presented a motion to parliament demanding a change to the Austrian constitution to prevent the building of mosques. Other incidents documented included the Italian Northern League’s promise of a ‘pig day’ protest against new mosques, following the success of its campaign in Lodi. The League had brought a pig to the proposed site so that the land would be infected in Muslim eyes and no new mosque would not be built.

Islamophobia, as I understand it, is a hostile mindset to the Muslim world. Islamophobia today comprises a modern reshaping of Orientalism under colonialism, only today, the Orient is treated not as a separate geographical region but as a problem located – thanks to Europe’s growing Muslim minority populations – within the Occident itself. Islamophobia today provides a pool of ideas, teeming with stereotypes and simplistic generalisations, from which policy-makers fish in order to restructure the law in ways that discriminate against Muslims.

No other minority in western Europe today is as vulnerable to institutionalised racism and media-generated hostility as the Muslim community. It is the post-September 11

climate, and the government's ill-conceived anti-terrorist laws, that have given widespread respectability to Islamophobia.

When anti-terrorist laws create a separate criminal justice system for Muslims beyond the ordinary rule of law then racism against Muslims is given the imprimatur of respectability.

When bans on the wearing of the hijab are imposed by the State, often amidst parliamentary and media debate which stigmatises Muslim women as either a dangerous third column of Islamism, or the helpless victims of fundamentalist men, is it any wonder that Muslim women are spat upon, abused and humiliated as they go about their daily business? The OSCE's Adviser on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims, has, quite rightly, pointed to the absence of proper data on anti-Muslim hate crimes. But how can we expect women experiencing harassment on account of wearing the hijab, to report these crimes to the authorities when the same authorities issue laws restricting the rights of women wearing the hijab? One woman who did report harassment to the police was Marwa al-Sherbini, an Egyptian woman living in Germany. She decided to give evidence against her abuser, a fanatical neo-Nazi sympathiser who called her an 'Islamist whore' and stabbed her to death in a Dresden courtroom while shouting 'you have no right to live'. Yet it took over one week for the German government to name this attack as an Islamophobic crime – and that only because it was shamed into so doing.

The scale and extent of the organised promotion of racism towards Muslims cannot, in my view be adequately captured by any debate around individual acts of 'hate crime'. It is absolutely correct that hate crimes against different communities are analysed in ways that capture the specifics of each kind of crime. But I worry that, if we are not careful, we will be diverted from an inclusive civil rights agenda that unites us communities in a battle against racism, discrimination and for equality? And I worry also that the whole 'hate crime' debate, in blurring the boundaries between prejudice, intolerance, stereotyping, discrimination, institutionalised racism and, ultimately, fascism, seriously disadvantages us in our struggles against the abuse, or failures, of state power. There is also a danger that different identity groups, instead of coming together in a common fight, are pitted against one another in a struggle for resources and in a bid to get the issue of *their* victim-community placed on the tables of those in power.

And, so in conclusion, I want to respond to the question posed by this forum - how do we respond to anti-Muslim hate crimes, how do we get law enforcement officials to act? And the answer to that lies in the first instance in the case of Marwa al-Sherbini that I mentioned earlier. Did Angela Merkel, express her horror at this anti-Muslim murder? No. Did the media speak out? No. The only prominent non-Muslim figure that spoke out was Stephan Kramer, the Secretary General of the German Jewish Council who visited the dead woman's husband in hospital and in declaring the government's response absurd said 'We want to send a signal against Islamophobia'.

All the great struggles against racism in the past have involved communities coming together to demand that their social situation of racism is recognised and acknowledged for what it is. But how can we continue to send a strong signal against Islamophobia when today in Western Europe we face a situation where Muslims are being denied the right to speak out against the social situation they face. I travel around Europe and I deplore the fact that in many parts of Europe you cannot even use the term Islamophobia. Just as Black people used to be told that they had a 'chip on their shoulder' by speaking out against racism based on skin colour, Muslims are now being told that there is no reality of Islamophobia, and the term has been invented by Muslims as a way of preventing freedom of speech and criticism against Islam. Unfortunately, we saw a variation of this argument in this morning's session of the HDIM when one prominent official, singling out Islamic fundamentalism for attack, appeared to argue that too much visible and vocal religiosity on the part of minorities provokes a hostile reaction. The argument he was advancing, it seems to me, suggested that Muslims, who are visibly religious, i.e. by wearing the headscarf, or growing beards, provoke hostile acts against themselves. Advancing such an argument is totally unacceptable in a forum like this, which, after all, is meant to be dealing with how to protect people from intolerance and hate crimes.

Hate crime against Muslims is only the fall-out, the symptom of a bigger malaise. We need to find the politicians, the artists, the public intellectuals and other prominent figures, prepared to 'Speak Out' and join us in our campaigns against institutionalised racism and for civil rights.

What can we do? The answer is quite simple. We need to force all those in authority to acknowledge the problem. And the problem is institutionalised racism against Muslims and the organised hysteria it generates.