

## 2.3 Defamation of Islam and Dialogue between Cultures

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The role we played following the publication of the drawings aimed mainly at containing and rectifying matters at the bilateral level with a view *not* to internationalize the issue. We live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and we know pretty well that the press is free and that it is “the Fourth Authority”. That is also true in many of our countries. So, the aim was not to ask a Government to “punish” the newspaper since everyone knows it cannot. Rather, the objective was to explain to a country that it is party to several international instruments and UN Resolutions which explicitly state that the exercise of the right to freedom of expression “carries with it special duties and responsibilities” (Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19.3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 10.2 of the European Convention on Human Rights); and that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law” (Article 20.2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).

We are not short of conventions or resolutions that spell out the responsibilities of Governments in such cases. Suffice it to refer here to the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005) sponsored by an EU Member State and unanimously adopted by the Council, which met at summit level on 14 September 2005. Operative paragraph 3 of this resolution “calls upon all States to continue international efforts to

enhance dialogue and broaden understanding among civilizations in an effort to prevent the indiscriminate targeting of different religions and cultures.”

Nor are we short of reports that EU-commissioned centres such as the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) have issued as the “Report on Islamophobia in the EU following September 11”. That report highlighted the regularity with which ordinary Muslims became targets for abusive and sometimes violent retaliatory attacks, all of which were seemingly becoming more extreme and accepted.

In New York, a draft resolution sponsored by the Islamic Group and presented to the General Assembly on “Combating Defamation of Religions” was adopted by a majority of 101 votes with 53 ‘Western countries’ voting against it, including all European Union Member States.

It was the same resolution that the same countries had voted against at the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in April 2004. The explanation of the *no* vote then was the claim that the resolution singled out Islam, not all religions. Again, on 31 October 2005 in the Third Committee, and on 16 December in the General Assembly, the same explanation of vote was advanced, ignoring that the Islamic Group in New York wanted to defuse a looming popular outrage worldwide, and that it did not bring the same resolution to the General Assembly for fun but for a message to be sent by the international community to some 1.2 billion Muslims all over the world who felt that the most sublime symbol of Islam was insulted and that their religion was denigrated.

Coming to the resolution itself, out of 16 operative paragraphs only four project facts about the outlook to Islam by the West, especially since 11 September, and the link between Islam and terrorism, often denied officially by Western leaders, but more often advanced by some circles in the West; discrimination against Islam and other religions, and defamation of all religions, particularly Islam. 12 other operative paragraphs cite facts about manifestations of tolerance and discrimination in matters of religions and beliefs, and urge States to take resolute action to prohibit the dissemination of racist and xenophobic ideas and material.

The way the issue evolved is the responsibility of those among our partners who were either rigid in their dealing with the issue, those who turned a blind eye to our efforts to diplomatically defuse any probable popular outrage, not even replying to oral and written messages sent to them since late October 2005, or those who preach dialogue and respect

for all religions and then vote against a resolution calling for combating defamation of religions.

Aren't the provisions of that resolution the same points raised in reports of the EU-financed Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), whether in its report on Islamophobia in EU Member States, or in the latest 2005 Report on Racism and Xenophobia in EU Member States, which cite trends at discrimination and racism adversely affecting minority groups, migrants and refugees in several EU Member States, in the employment, housing and education sectors, and which make a reference to violent and aggressive acts against ethnic minority and foreign groups by public officials – namely the police and immigration officers?

Aren't those the principles mentioned in several European Council Directives, let alone in the rulings of the European Court on Human Rights in many cases of violation of those principles?

Didn't our Foreign Ministers endorse five principles that should govern dialogue, originally proposed by us, in the Action Programme on Dialogue between Cultures and Civilizations, at their meeting in Valencia in April 2002?

*“Dialogue between cultures and civilizations should be conducted on the basis of certain parameters and principles, namely:*

- 1. Respect for pluralism, diversity and cultural specificities.*
- 2. Equality and mutual respect.*
- 3. Avoidance of prejudices and stereotypes.*
- 4. Dialogue should aim to reach not only a better understanding of “the other” but also solutions for persistent problems.*
- 5. The ultimate goal of dialogue should not be to change “the other” but, rather, to live peacefully with the other.”*

As regards respect for Islam in Europe and indeed anywhere, Islam is a religion embraced by 1.2 billion people. Islam is the only religion that venerates all the prophets and messengers that God has sent to peoples since Abraham. It is part of the pillars of Islam

to respect all God's prophets and messengers and they are mentioned one by one in the Qur'an. The least Muslims expect is that their religion and its symbols receive the same respect, even if large numbers of people in the West are secular, agnostic or atheist amid a majority of Christians. Some 20 million Muslims live in Europe, the majority of whom are law-abiding citizens who are well integrated in their societies and who are equally attached to their spiritual ideals and values.

Indeed, those who claim to uphold freedom of expression by defending the right to reproduce offensive drawings of the Prophet of Islam are in effect saying to Muslims that what they hold dear and sacred is far more worthy of protection than what Muslims hold dear and sacred. The cartoons had more to do with incitement of hatred, racism and xenophobia than with freedom of expression.

As early as November 2001, that is only two months after the tragic September 11 incidents, our delegation to the Euro-Mediterranean Committee meeting under the Belgian Presidency proposed that a separate item entitled "Dialogue between Cultures" be inscribed on the agenda of each Senior Officials meeting. At the 31<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Euro-Med Committee in Brussels on 7 February 2002, under item 2: Dialogue of Cultures and Civilizations, I made a statement in which I stated that "dialogue between civilizations should be pursued on the basis of equality and mutual respect; we should not be led by the saying that 'all people are equal but some people are more equal than others'...We must bear in mind a basic reality – the world we live in today is a result of the meshing of our cultures and civilizations. All civilizations and peoples should be proud of their respective accomplishments and contributions to the world. Yet, each one must assess its shortcomings or pitfalls, for we are all capable of using violence and no one is immune of that. All have, at one moment or another of their history, let intolerance, hatred and contempt reign unbridled. In each culture, some have even sought to negate the humanity of others."

We also stated that "Today, we are at the crossroads of history. We have to make a choice: either seek to build bridges of understanding, or fall into the abyss of never-ending conflict with tragic consequences for mankind. The paradigm that we should aspire to evolve and nurture is one of civilized interaction and international legitimacy versus arrogance, extremism and lawlessness".

One of the positive results of that incident is that everyone should draw lessons for the future and should not play into the hands of extremists or bigots on all sides. Our

European partners should keep good on their word to work earnestly towards a true and unbiased dialogue between cultures and civilizations. We should teach present generations to “live and let live” and to respect cultural and religious diversity. We should all work diligently to prevent any inklings of a clash of civilizations, which would be detrimental to peace and the welfare of peoples. Between freedom and anarchy, there is a hair-thin border line. Let everyone learn and work for not crossing or trespassing that line.

Some European Government ministers or heads of political parties came out with flagrant anti-Muslim statements, describing Islam as a plague or calling for a new crusade against Muslims, thereby triggering popular reactions in Muslim countries and in Europe, with violent, unforeseen and undesired consequences. In this regard, we certainly denounce physical or material attacks against citizens or official representations as such acts are contrary to the letter and spirit of Islam. We equally expect others to ensure the same for our citizens and official buildings in those States.

At the same time, in the past few days we have seen political leaders in several EU countries who came out courageously to condemn any insult to other religions, and to openly denounce the irresponsible and immoral republication of the infamous drawings in some media. Those politicians are the brave people who seek to establish peace and harmony in their respective countries and in the world at large.

Let us admit that there is a crisis that needs to be resolved once and for all. We need to work together:

1. To pledge that we will do our utmost to avoid repetition of such offences to religions and their symbols.
2. To return to and intensify dialogue between cultures, which we started in earnest in the Euro-Med Committee since November 2001 but which, for several reasons, has tapered off. We should develop imaginative measures to drastically reduce racist and anti-Muslim sentiments in many parts of the world.
3. The Alliance among Civilizations initiative by Spain, welcomed and endorsed last November by 35 Euro-Mediterranean partners on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Barcelona Process, should be activated and translated into deeds and actions. In this regard, we look forward to the outcome of the Qatar meeting of this initiative.

4. The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures, hosted in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, is meant to foster this dialogue. It is essential that we understand each other better and that we continue in earnest the dialogue between cultures on the basis of mutual respect. In this regard, one idea could be that a seminar be organized at the Anna Lindh Foundation, which comprises Senior Officials and eminent persons from the EU and Mediterranean regions to discuss ways and means of enhancing dialogue and ensuring respect for religions and cultures through a set of actions and measures.
5. To work together in the Euro-Mediterranean context to adopt a code of conduct on combating defamation of religions.
6. The second seminar on the media to be held in Vienna may discuss an agreement on a code of ethics for the media regarding self-restraint in publications that hurt or insult religious sanctities.
7. At the global level, to send a clear message to the international community that all countries reject defamation of religions or cultures and are determined to stand against any attempts at smearing or mocking any religion, belief, culture, ethnic group, or their symbols. The shortest and most practical way to send such a message is for our representatives in New York to sit together and work on a resolution with unequivocal messages to Governments, the media, NGOs and peoples all over the world. They can take, as a basis for a brief and concise text, GA Resolution 60/150.<sup>1</sup>

For the immediate future, we should send a positive signal to our peoples that the current emergency has led to advancing the Euro-Med Committee meeting by one month. In other words, our meeting today can be considered an extraordinary meeting. We therefore propose that this meeting come out with a Presidency statement on behalf of the 35 Euro-Mediterranean Partners reflecting our joint resolve to intensifying the dialogue, to work diligently to prevent the recurrence of those offences to Islam or to any religion, to reaffirm that we share a common future that we should nurture together, and to reiterate the continuing validity of the five principles that should govern our dialogue as set out in Valencia.

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1 UN General Assembly Resolution on "Combating Defamation of Religion", adopted on 16 December 2005.

Such a statement should be publicized worldwide so that we can both appease the outrage of Muslims all over the world and help defuse the present crisis. The crisis is still raging. So, any 'business as usual' message from the Euro-Mediterranean Partners could cause a backlash.

As Arab and Muslim countries, we have been dismayed at the mere two sentences that came in the conclusions of the latest GAERC (EU coordination, Ed.) meeting about the ongoing crisis. We wondered if that was the weight given by the European Union to such serious an issue. We therefore hope, and indeed expect, that the forthcoming GAERC meeting on 27 February will rectify matters by projecting what most Heads of State or Government of EU Member States have been recently expressing concerning respect for Islam, its symbols and its followers.