

Remarks from Hon. Matteo Mecacci at the high-level conference on “Confronting Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in Public Discourse”

Vienna, 28 October 2011

Thank you Mr. Chairman,

This is a very timely conference to discuss how, in the OSCE region, the public discourse relates to Islam in general, and with Islamic communities and individuals in particular. I have just gotten back, together with Ambassador Andreas Nothelle and Roberto Montella, from Tunisia where - together with dozens of Parliamentarians from the OSCE PA, the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament - we observed the first elections held in North Africa and in the Middle East since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring and the subsequent demise of some of the authoritarian government of that region.

All observers agree that despite the many challenges, the vote and the electoral campaigning was conducted in a competitive and transparent way. As we all know, democracy and the rule of law cannot be established simply with the holding of one fair election, but the beginning of democracy which we have witnessed in an Arab and Muslim state must certainly be encouraged.

The reason I am mentioning this in the context of this conference is not only related to the political relevance of what happened last Sunday for Tunisia, for the entire region, the OSCE, and for Europe, but also in order to reflect on our perceptions and our descriptions of the Arab and Muslim world. In fact, for decades, a significant part of the leadership of European and Western states have considered the predominantly Muslim societies of North Africa and the Middle East as simply unfit for democracy.

We have seen how leading intellectuals and politicians in the Western world have developed theories of so-called “cultural relativism,” according to which Muslims and Arabs were simply not capable, for cultural and historical reasons (and for some of them even for racial reasons) of living in a democracy, and it was therefore necessary for us to support dictatorships. Or at the utmost when these governments finally became dangerous, the only way to deal with them should be to overthrow them with military interventions.

Now, putting aside for a moment any consideration on the wisdom of such policies - which I believe speak for themselves - it is necessary to state that the misguided perception about Muslims by an increasing part of our societies also depends on these theories, which have been backed - sometimes indirectly, sometimes directly - by our States and is not only a product of the rise of populist and extremist parties.

This, I believe, is important to note, and for example, the rise of the opposition to the entry of Turkey in the European Union has coincided with the increased support shown by the Turkish people to the Justice and Development Party led by Prime Minister Recep Erdogan. Since then we have seen the rise in the European public debate, not exactly of

Islamophobia, but of the need, for example, to define Europe as a geographical concept with physical boundaries, based on cultural affinity, on the need to reaffirm the Christian and Jewish roots of our continent, and more generally on the incompatibility of Muslim values with Christian values. Apart from historical considerations on the role of the Mediterranean in the history of the European region, I might as well remind the proponents of such theories that Jesus Christ was born in Palestine.

We can see that in our societies there is an increasing need to build new cultural and physical walls when faced with new challenges. Economic challenges, migration challenges, fuel the legitimate concerns of our people if they are addressed only by populist policies. And it is not a secret that this reaction is also partly due to terrorist organizations, who take inspiration from Muslim extremists who have been able to threaten seriously the security of our societies.

It is also important to note that Muslim societies have an historical challenge to confront; and this is the relationship with a modern and secular society where individual, and not community rights are at the center of the relationship between the citizens, the State, and regional organizations. But we cannot expect this to happen overnight after decades of dictatorship.

I believe that the best way to tackle the rise of populism and extremism in public discourse in our societies, which is targeting minority groups, and in particular Muslims, is to engage directly at the institutional and political level with the societies of the Mediterranean region to affirm in a joint effort the universality of individual rights, which those people are now clearly demanding.

If Europe and the OSCE will not be there for them, someone else will. And in order to do that that it is necessary for the leadership of these regions, including the European Union, to try to solve the economic and social crisis that we are facing, not recurring to nationalist policies and the stigmatization of minorities, which would bring us back to the period before the First World War (and, in this regard, the rhetoric used these days by EU leaders is very worrying). Instead, we should embrace a future of institutional transnational cooperation with Muslim countries based on the universal values of democracy and freedom.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to continuing the discussion with you about these issues in the future.