

Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe

Author(s): Parliamentary Assembly

Origin - *Assembly debate* on 23 June 2010 (23rd Sitting) (see [Doc. 12266](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Mogens Jensen; [Doc. 12303](#), opinion of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Hancock; [Doc. 12305](#), opinion of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, rapporteur: Mr Rafael Huseynov; and [Doc. 12304](#), opinion of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Memecan). *Text adopted unanimously by the Assembly* on 23 June 2010 (23rd Sitting). See also [Recommendation 1927 \(2010\)](#).

- 1.** The Parliamentary Assembly notes that Islamic radicalism and manipulation of religious beliefs for political reasons oppose human rights and democratic values. At the same time, in many Council of Europe member states, Muslims feel socially excluded, stigmatised and discriminated against; they become victims of stereotypes, social marginalisation and political extremism. The Assembly is deeply concerned about Islamic extremism as well as about extremism against Muslim communities in Europe. Both phenomena reinforce each other.
- 2.** The Assembly recalls that Islamism is the view that Islam is not only a religion but also a social, legal and political code of conduct. Islamism can be violent or mainstream and peaceful, but in both cases it does not accept the separation between religion and state, which is a fundamental principle of democratic and pluralistic societies. The Assembly also recalls that discrimination against Muslims is unacceptable and must be combated. A great majority of European Muslims share the principles at the basis of our societies and it is essential to fight against Islamophobia, which stems mainly from lack of awareness and from negative perceptions associating Islam with violence. Failing to address these issues, many European governments pave the way to the rise of extremism.
- 3.** Muslims are at home in Europe where they have been present for many centuries, as the Assembly noted in its [Recommendation 1162 \(1991\)](#) on the contribution of the Islamic civilisation to European culture. Islam, Judaism and Christianity – the three monotheist religions – share the same historic and cultural roots and recognise the same fundamental values, in particular the paramount value of human life and dignity, the ability and freedom to express thoughts, the respect for others and their property, and the importance of social welfare. Those values have been reflected by European philosophies and have been included in the European Convention on Human Rights (“the Convention”; ETS No. 5).
- 4.** Article 9 of the Convention guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to manifest one’s religion or belief, either alone or in

community with others, in public or in private, in worship, teaching, practice and observance. Article 10 of the Convention enshrines freedom of expression, including the right to express religious or philosophical views or oppose and criticise them. Both freedoms constitute the necessary requirements for a democratic society. However, they are not absolute and may be subject to limits imposed under strict control. Moreover, in accordance with Article 17 of the Convention, they must not be abused for the destruction or undue limitation of any of the rights and freedoms set forth in the Convention.

5. The Assembly has already stressed the importance of reconciling these two freedoms in its [Resolution 1510 \(2006\)](#) on freedom of expression and respect for religious beliefs, as well as its [Recommendation 1805 \(2007\)](#) on blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on grounds of their religion. The Assembly firmly condemns death decrees and threats against people who criticise Islam or political views linked to Islam. It regrets, however, the initiatives taken by a number of United Nations member states that have resulted in the Human Rights Council adopting resolutions on action against defamation of religions, and in particular Islam, as this strategy constitutes a threat to freedom of expression.

6. Recalling its [Recommendation 1804 \(2007\)](#) on state, religion, secularity and human rights, the Assembly emphasises that democratic standards require a separation of the state and its organs from religions and religious organisations. Governments, parliaments and public administrations that democratically reflect and serve their society as a whole must be neutral towards all religious, agnostic or atheist beliefs. Nevertheless, religion and democracy are not incompatible, in particular as religions may play a beneficial social role. Member states should therefore encourage religious organisations to support actively peace, tolerance, solidarity and intercultural dialogue.

7. The Assembly notes with concern, however, that some Islamic organisations active in member states have been initiated by governments abroad and receive financial support and political guidance from those governments. The objectives of such organisations are hence not religious. National political expansion into other states under the disguise of Islam should be brought to light. In keeping with Article 11 of the Convention, member states can limit the activities of such organisations on condition that such limitations satisfy the requirements set forth in paragraph 2 of Article 11. Therefore, member states should require transparency and accountability of Islamic as well as other religious associations, for instance by requiring transparency of their statutory objectives, leadership, membership and financial resources.

8. As the Assembly indicated in its [Recommendation 1774 \(2006\)](#) on the Turkish presence in Europe: migrant workers and new European citizens, member governments and parliaments as well as the Council of Europe must give priority to fostering the social inclusion of Muslims and other religious minorities. The many efforts undertaken by member states to better integrate migrants are to be

commended, but this integration is often still far from reality, in particular with regard to Muslim migrants. Thus, the Assembly invites member states to be proactive in dealing with social, economic and political inequalities.

9. The Assembly calls on member states to effectively address the social and economic exclusion of Muslims and other minorities in Europe – including through the adoption, implementation and regular monitoring of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, policies and practices to protect them from the day-to-day discrimination they face and to ensure better access to legal remedies when their rights have been violated.

10. While organisational structures of Muslim communities in member states are desirable in order to facilitate contacts with governmental and administrative bodies, member governments and parliaments should also seek to establish direct political contacts with Muslims as equal citizens. Such direct contacts could be facilitated, for example, through public hearings at local and regional levels as well as through regional and national discussion platforms on the Internet. Referring to Recommendation 170 (2005) of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on intercultural and inter-faith dialogue: initiatives and responsibilities of local authorities, the Assembly calls on national parliaments to ensure that local authorities in their countries have the necessary legal, administrative and financial frameworks for local activities intended to foster social inclusion and intercultural dialogue.

11. It is necessary that persons belonging to a minority culture in their country do not isolate themselves and do not attempt to develop a parallel society. Thus the Assembly calls on the representatives of the Muslim communities to encourage intercultural dialogue and fight against divisions which would otherwise lead to societal frictions and conflicts. Recalling its [Resolution 1605 \(2008\)](#) and [Recommendation 1831 \(2008\)](#) on European Muslim communities confronted with extremism, the Assembly invites Muslims, their religious communities and their religious leaders to combat any form of extremism under the cover of Islam. Islam is a religion which upholds peace. Muslims should be the first to react with dismay and opposition when terrorists or political extremists use Islam for their own power struggle and thus disrespect the fundamental value of human life and other values enshrined in Islam.

12. The Assembly deplores that a growing number of political parties in Europe exploit and encourage fear of Islam and organise political campaigns which promote simplistic and negative stereotypes concerning Muslims in Europe and often equate Islam with extremism. It is inadmissible to incite intolerance and sometimes even hatred against Muslims. The Assembly calls on member states to pursue political action in accordance with General Policy Recommendation No. 5 (2000) of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims. It reiterates that it is for the member

states to reject political statements that stir up fear and hatred of Muslims and Islam, while complying with the stipulations of the Convention, in particular Article 10.2.

13. The Assembly also remains concerned at policies and practices – by both national as well as regional and local authorities – that discriminate against Muslims and at the danger of the abuse of popular votes, initiatives and referenda to legitimise restrictions on the rights to freedom of religion and expression which are unacceptable under Articles 9 and 10 of the Convention. In this context, the Assembly is particularly concerned about the recent referendum in Switzerland and urges the Swiss authorities to enact a moratorium on and repeal as soon as possible, the general prohibition on the construction of minarets for mosques.

14. Recalling its [Resolution 1464 \(2005\)](#) on women and religion in Europe, the Assembly calls on all Muslim communities to abandon any traditional interpretations of Islam which deny gender equality and limit women's rights, both within the family and in public life. This interpretation is not compatible with human dignity and democratic standards; women are equal to men in all respects and must be treated accordingly, with no exceptions. Discrimination against women, whether based on religious traditions or not, goes against Articles 8, 9 and 14 of the Convention, Article 5 of its Protocol No. 7 and its Protocol No. 12. No religious or cultural relativism may be invoked to justify violations of personal integrity. The Parliamentary Assembly therefore urges member states to take all necessary measures to stamp out radical Islamism and Islamophobia, of which women are the prime victims.

15. In this respect, the veiling of women, especially full veiling through the *burqa* or the *niqab*, is often perceived as a symbol of the subjugation of women to men, restricting the role of women within society, limiting their professional life and impeding their social and economic activities. Neither the full veiling of women, nor even the headscarf, are recognised by all Muslims as a religious obligation of Islam, but they are seen by many as a social and cultural tradition. The Assembly considers that this tradition could be a threat to women's dignity and freedom. No woman should be compelled to wear religious apparel by her community or family. Any act of oppression, sequestration or violence constitutes a crime that must be punished by law. Women victims of these crimes, whatever their status, must be protected by member states and benefit from support and rehabilitation measures.

16. For this reason, the possibility of prohibiting the wearing of the *burqa* and the *niqab* is being considered by parliaments in several European countries. Article 9 of the Convention includes the right of individuals to choose freely to wear or not to wear religious clothing in private or in public. Legal restrictions to this freedom may be justified where necessary in a democratic society, in particular for security purposes or where public or professional functions of individuals require their religious neutrality or that their face can be seen. However, a general prohibition of wearing the *burqa* and the *niqab* would deny women who freely desire to do so their right to cover their face.

17. In addition, a general prohibition might have the adverse effect of generating family and community pressure on Muslim women to stay at home and confine themselves to contacts with other women. Muslim women could be further excluded if they were to leave educational institutions, stay away from public places and abandon work outside their communities, in order not to break with their family tradition. Therefore, the Assembly calls on member states to develop targeted policies intended to raise Muslim women's awareness of their rights, help them to take part in public life and offer them equal opportunities to pursue a professional life and gain social and economic independence. In this respect, the education of young Muslim women as well as of their parents and families is crucial. It is especially necessary to remove all forms of discrimination against girls and to develop education on gender equality, without stereotypes and at all levels of the education system.

18. Female genital mutilation under the pretext of Islamic or other customs should be considered as a crime as it violates the right to physical and moral integrity of all individuals and especially of girls. Member states must do their utmost to put an end to this crime and provide practical help to children and their parents, including in particular through education. The Assembly recalls in this context its [Resolution 1247 \(2001\)](#) on female genital mutilation.

19. The Assembly accordingly urges member states to take every step to prevent and combat all forms of oppression or violence undergone by women and, in particular, as part of the negotiations for the future Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, to support the provisions enabling women irrespective of their origin or status to have access to protection, prevention and rehabilitation facilities.

20. Stereotypes, misunderstandings and fears with regard to Islam are typical symptoms of a widespread lack of adequate knowledge among non-Muslims in Europe. Similarly, many Muslims in Europe lack adequate knowledge of Islam let alone other religions, which can make them vulnerable to "Islamism" as a religiously disguised form of political extremism. In this context, the Assembly recalls its [Recommendation 1720 \(2005\)](#) on education and religion and calls on member states to ensure that knowledge about Islam, Judaism and Christianity is taught at school and through lifelong education.

21. Teaching about religions should be supported by member states, to raise public awareness of the common origin and values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and their impact on modern European humanism. Institutions of higher education and research in Europe should provide Islamic studies in order to educate religious scholars, teachers and leaders and distinguish Islam from Islamism. The Assembly is confident that most European Muslims accept a common approach reconciling Islam with democratic values, human rights and the rule of law; indeed, many have done so for a long time.

22. The Assembly also welcomes the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue prepared by the Council of Europe during the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008 as well as other activities by the Committee of Ministers in this field. Member governments should use the White Paper in their related national action, including in schools and educational institutions.

23. It is important to create synergies with other international organisations in this respect. Therefore, the Assembly invites the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations to co-operate more closely with the Council of Europe, in particular by setting up joint programmes of action. In this context, the Assembly invites the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to seek additional funding for such activities through member states and facilitate reciprocal secondment of staff between the two organisations.

24. The Assembly invites the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) to work with the Council of Europe on combating Islamism and Islamophobia or other religious discrimination as well as on promoting the respect for universal human rights. ISESCO and ALECSO can be particularly important in ensuring that their members respect the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of the United Nations.

25. In this context, the Assembly regrets that some member governments of ISESCO and ALECSO have adopted national legislation based on an interpretation of Sharia law or have pursued national policies which are in conflict with the ICCPR and the ICESCR: imposing severe penalties or even the death penalty on persons wishing to adopt a religion other than Islam is incompatible with Article 18 (2) ICCPR; imposing severe sanctions on, or passing public death decrees against, persons who have criticised Islam is incompatible with Article 19 of the ICCPR; calling for a “holy war” or violence against other countries or their citizens and glorifying terrorists as “holy martyrs” is incompatible with Article 20 (2) of the ICCPR; educating children to hate or fight persons of faiths other than Islam is incompatible with Article 13 (1) of the ICESCR.

26. Contacts between Muslim and non-Muslim Europeans and Muslims in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia should be facilitated, in particular among young people, students and teachers. The Assembly invites, therefore, the European Youth Forum to expand its activities in this field. Co-operation between educational and cultural institutions as well as cities around the Mediterranean Basin should be supported, for instance in the framework of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS No. 165) and the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (CETS No. 106).