

**Preventing and Countering Hate Crimes against Christians and Members of other Religious Groups – Perspectives from the OSCE and Beyond**

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Keynote by Professor Ingeborg G. Gabriel, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination also Focussing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions

Esteemed minister, your excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to speak to you at this occasion. My thanks go to the Austrian Chairmanship and the Government of Armenia for convening this event. Thank you for the invitation to your beautiful country with her long history and roots reaching back to the beginnings of Christianity, keeping faith alive even in the darkest hours.

The OSCE, since its very beginnings, is founded on a vision of **universal humanism** as the basis of peaceful relations among and within states. The so called Helsinki process initiated cooperation in security as well as in economic (later also ecological) issues. However, it always also **emphasised in a unique way human rights and democracy**, the so called Third Dimension, as an indispensable basis for peace and security in the region, particularly the right to freedom of religion and belief as one of the pillars for the protection of human dignity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our challenging times it is of great importance to reconceive and rekindle this spirit of Helsinki affirming its unique vision under new geopolitical conditions taking into account its implications for the OSCE partnership countries in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East. **Human rights are indivisible**, as had been stated in the final document of the 1993 Conference on Human Rights and often ever since. Security can only be achieved through the constant efforts to guarantee human rights within states and as foundation of interstate relations.

To combat intolerance and discrimination, **hate crimes and hate speech**, is part of the OSCE mission. Both are undoubtedly on the rise in the region and beyond, taking ever more brutal forms. This is highly disquieting. The target are also religious groups and increasingly also Christian communities. Whereas the legal situation with regard to conscientious objection has improved during the past years the number of **hate crimes against Christians**, acts of vandalism against churches, mountain crosses and other religious objects is on the rise. ODIHR's collection of disaggregated data on hate crimes are most welcome to better monitor these incidents (a look at its excellent homepage, however, shows that there is still room for improvement with regard to reporting of member states). Efforts should also be made to hold **international companies owning social media networks** responsible and make them take more effective action against all forms of hate speech which create social tensions and can jeopardize good relations between different social and religious groups.

The greatest challenge, which is also one of the priorities of this year's Austrian presidency, is the **fight against extremism and its most violent form, terrorism**. Crimes committed in the name of God are for all believers to whichever religion they belong utter blasphemy since they discredit God's name and with them all religions. It is therefore not only a human but also a religious duty to say "a firm and **clear 'No!'** to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God."<sup>1</sup> - to cite the words of Pope Francis when he visited Egypt in April.

The best institutional remedy against the disconcerting increase in violence and hatred is indeed a **strong culture of human rights**, including the right to freedom of religion. It rests on three different pillars: **First** and foremost, adequate legal provisions in compliance with international standards. **Second**, the application of these standards by an effective administration supported by politics is of vital importance. The activities of ODIHR to improve the rule of law, train police and other officials as well as support civil society organisations are important elements in this struggle. **Third**, and perhaps most important a culture of human rights requires a strong anchorage in **civic convictions** and attitudes grounded in the respect for the dignity of each and every human person. To form and sustain such civic convictions intercultural and interreligious dialogue are of increasing importance. *Dia-logou* literally means "through the word", constituting a radical antidote to all forms of violence and coercion. It takes various forms – which one may call the five **E**: **education** including theological education and research, **empirical studies** for a clearer understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the International Peace Conference*, Al-Azhar Conference Centre, Cairo, 28 April 2017.

the present developments, a wide range of civic **encounters** in all areas of life and **best practices examples**, since - as the saying goes - words teach, examples encourage (verba docent, exempla trahunt). Last but not least dialogue needs as a base strong ethical foundations in the belief in the freedom and dignity of the human being - that can be found in different religions and world views.

Ladies and gentlemen

The political actions required to create a well-founded culture of human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, vary in different state contexts. In states where human rights violations are common also the right to religious freedom is frequently infringed upon. A particular problem in this context is the crackdown on small religious groups and/or individuals under the pretext of combatting religious extremism. Groups, like Baptists or Jehovah's witnesses or other small religious groups, become easy victims of such policies. To give but *one example: Some women in an old age home reading the bible are convicted and lose part of their pensions. This may be compared to some of the horrors we hear of daily, seem a minor incident. However, when the weakest are targeted this way, this still must cause compassion in any human being.*

Furthermore there are **two opposing tendencies** which in different ways can interfere with religious freedom: There is on the one hand a secularist tendency to ban religious symbols from public space and relegate religion into the private realm. *One may, however, seriously doubt whether a world free of religion would indeed be a better world. Recent history, of which also this country has gravely suffered, shows otherwise.* On the other hand there is the promotion of so called **traditional values, sometimes also called Christian values**. This is – I daresay – a misleading label, since these values are often not well founded in Christian Scriptures or traditions, and certainly cannot make exclusive claims. This becomes particularly dubious, if - as happened in some cases - a patriarchal understanding of the family condoning domestic violence is being promoted as a traditional value.

The great achievement of the right to religious freedom is that it **guarantees equal citizenship to all** independent of their respective religion (or non-religion). Such equal citizenship is denied by all forms of authoritarianism or even totalitarianism using religion. As the title of this conference “Perspectives from the OSCE region and Beyond” something has to be said about the truly tragic developments in the Middle East. Christians there have lived together with other religious groups throughout history, ethnic and religious **diversity being**

**one of the distinctive features of the region.** In recent years this conviviality has been threatened, and often the very survival of smaller religious groups, Christians and other, is at stake. Radical fanatics, most prominently of the so-called Islamic State (its chief ideologist and theologian by the way being an Austrian Muslim) intended to eradicate these communities from the map through brutal kidnappings, murder, torture, rape, and the expulsion of peaceful citizens from their homes. Let me particularly mention the **plight of women and girls**, of whom several thousands are still supposed to be in sexual slavery and many who survived this ordeal will suffer traumas for life. Several national and international bodies have condemned these events as genocide.

Daesh has largely been defeated. But there remains the urgent need to support the countries of the Middle East, particularly their indigenous religious communities, like Yesidis and Christians of all denominations. Humanitarian help is important but not enough. Just as vital is the rebuilding of functioning state structures, the ‘rule of law’ and human rights, particularly the right to freely confess one’s religion individually and collectively. And despite all horrors, there are also positive signs. Support for **equal citizenship** to replace the traditional regime of ‘protected minorities’ is becoming more frequent. Thus the rector of the renowned Al-Ahzar university affirmed this at the occasion of the visit of Pope Francis in April. Moreover, awareness is rising that religious pluralism as a positive feature of the Middle East should be protected. This has been affirmed at a high level conference **in Athens** under the title “Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East” organized by the Greek Government end of October. Similar conferences have recently been held in Jordan, Qatar and Rabat. This is a sign of hope.

However, if the exodus of Christians from their ancestral lands, where they have lived since the time of Jesus Christ, is to be stopped, the economic, political and social conditions have to improve rapidly. A Christian friend from Amman wrote me some days ago: Everybody in our communities is talking of plan B, e. g. how to best get a visa and to which country to emigrate. We no longer see a future here for ourselves. Those who fled ISIS have to be able to return to their homes. According to the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, Aram I, the following conditions have to be met that this can happen: the protection and security of life, the affirmation of pluralism and diversity, the rejection of extremism and the overcoming of violence, as well as the striving for a peace with justice.<sup>2</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://horizonweekly.ca/en/religious-pluralism-and-peaceful-coexistence-in-the-middle-east/>

The preservation of religious pluralism in the Middle East is a humanitarian duty. But it is also an act of political wisdom. To turn a blind eye on the plight of Yesidis, Christians and other religious groups does not only show a lack of human compassion, silence about the crimes offending the victims, it is also politically short sighted.

When preparing for an official visit some years ago a Turkish professor in Vienna of Islamic studies, said words that have rung in my ears ever since: And do speak up for religious freedom, this you owe to yourself as well as to us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Indeed, we owe it to others as well as to ourselves to speak up for religious freedom. The history of the OSCE demonstrates that a strong commitment to human rights can be crowned with long term success. One of the lessons of this experience is also that civil society organisations, inspired by secular or religious humanism, are central fellow campaigners in this struggle. On my way back from the conference in Athens I shared a taxi with a young Egyptian lady. She had turned away from the Muslim brotherhood and its ideology and is now writing books and radio features against extremism (the latest about the Christian doctor who in 1911 saved the life of a child who was to become the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner for literature, Nagib Magfus). I asked myself after this meeting: is there enough support for her and others in the OSCE region and beyond who with admirable courage stand up for equal citizenship and human rights in their respective societies?

Allow me finally to make some suggestions for further discussion:

- How can the OSCE experience help in strengthening FoRB in the present situation in different countries?
- How can states be encouraged to monitor of hate crimes and hate speech against Christians and other religions, whereby the gender aspect should be taken into account in all programs?
- How can alliances between moderates, who are a majority in all religious communities be effectively strengthened through interreligious and intercultural dialogue at all levels?
- How can the engagement of OSCE with the eleven partnership countries be enforced, engaging also with their religious communities and leaders to improve the situation in the region?

- How can reconciliation in the countries of the Middle East be furthered, for instance through concrete steps like schemes for property restitution so that those who before fleeing precipitously had to sell their houses for a pittance may get them back, thus recreating trust?

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Human rights for all are a good compass. Polarizations and stereotypes directed against the Other, whether out of nationalistic or religious motives, are counterproductive and may even be destructive. What is needed is wisdom, persistence and the political will to realize justice for all. This striving for justice constitutes a universal human trait. In view of the history of mankind with all its horrors this is a fact worth contemplating. Humans always hoped, often inspired by religious beliefs, that love and justice will prevail over hatred and violence. Man is not only a wolf to man but also a friend and associate to his/her fellow human beings. This invincible hope lies at the basis of all culture as well as of our common endeavours in the OSCE region.

I thank you for your attention.