



**LECTURE BY
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ON

**“BUILDING BRIDGES: INTERCULTURAL
DIALOGUE IDENTITIES AND MIGRATION”.**

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Mr. Moderator, Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen

Allow me at the outset to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to Under Secretary General and General Director of the United Nations Office in Geneva Mr. Sergei A. ORDZHONIKZE and Mr. Carlos LOPES, Executive Director of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research for inviting me to participate in this august session.

The Geneva lecture series provides with a unique platform for rich and stimulating discourse on complex and pressing global challenges aimed at evolving constructive approaches towards solutions in the true spirit of multilateralism. It has been rightly described as an intellectual anchor for the work of the United Nations and a mechanism to channel current thinking and research into policy-making. I feel privileged to be a speaker at this fifth edition of the series along with an eminent and world renowned writer like Mr. Carlos Fuentes.

The theme of our debate today concerns intercultural dialogue, identities and migration. The imperative of building bridges is linked to cultural rapprochement. It is, therefore, fitting that our deliberations would come within the purview of the International Year for Cultural Rapprochement that is being observed under the UNGA Resolution 90/62.

I would, in this presentation, essentially approach this multifaceted issue in the light of my experience and role as the Secretary General of the OIC-which with its 57 member states has, over the last four decades, evolved as the second largest International Organization after the UN. We are currently in the process of implementing a Ten Year Programme of Action. Propelled by the vision of ‘moderation and modernization, the Programme has identified priority areas of action. It accords primacy to multilateralism, human rights and cultural diplomacy as key items on the OIC agenda. Each of these issues is relevant to our discussion today. I would, therefore, be sharing a few thoughts in both the spirit and interest of a lively debate that-I am confident -would follow in this prestigious setting.

Distinguished Participants,

The age old maxim that “*no man is an island*” is true today as much as it was when the term was first coined. Every human being holds some basic attributes of identity: a name, parentage and family background as well as cultural and religious association. Differences in physical structure and cultural and ethnic background of humans from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds notwithstanding, our chemistry of survival is one and same as determined by nature.

The unique characteristic of humans is that they cannot live in isolation. It is inherent in all of us to seek and develop relationships with our fellow beings. This process has led to the formation of institutions of the family, tribes, societies, villages, cities, and states.

The indomitable human aspiration to go beyond the confines of their own surroundings and reach out to a larger world has stood the test of time. Migration of people across lands whether driven by wars, natural disasters, economic compulsions, or simply by the urge to move to another civilization, contributed to an intermingling of cultures and civilizations. This diversity of cultures, civilizations and beliefs enriched human existence as we embraced, learned, shared and benefited from each other. This is particularly true in shaping our present day world of diversity.

Migration, however, has never been simple process. Migrants have had to adjust themselves to a new way of life that was strange and unfamiliar. The recipient societies were equally taxed in accepting people who were different. The challenge for both has always been to interact and reconcile. It was difficult but could happen when the inherent quality of human bondage overcame the constraints through dialogue, understanding and appreciation of each other.

While it was incumbent for the migrants to integrate into their new surroundings, they could not be expected to rid themselves of their identity as adherents to own cultural and

religious background. Identity is essential for the human being. It forms an important component of personality and self-worth. It lends the all important anchor, root, and a sense of belonging. It helps define the present and leads to the future. Belonging to a culture and civilization endows the individual with self-confidence and trust in the company of people with different mind or taste.

It is from this source that most of the noble human values sprung through the ages. Each society venerates its heritage while respecting other societies' heritage and culture. It is in this manner that peaceful co-existence is ensured, cultural diversity safeguarded and human interaction promoted.

Shared human values have evolved over centuries. These have undergone a lengthy process of refinement to form contemporary universal values enshrined in international law, international humanitarian law and myriad of treaties, covenants and conventions. Prominent among these values is embracing cultural diversity and tolerance.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

Any discussion on the interlinked issues of migration, identity and the need for intercultural dialogue will have to be contextualized in this era of globalization - which constitutes the defining characteristics of our times. Globalization might have been an ideology brimming with promise. The manner, however, in which it has unfolded, thus far, is considered - at least in the developing world to which majority of OIC Member States belong- to have belied the expectations of the ideologues. The powerful driving force of globalization has brought about a tidal wave of migration. It needs to be appreciated that most of the migration that takes place in our world today is economic in nature induced by the interconnectivity of our times. The asymmetrical trajectory that globalization continued to pursue over the last two decades sustained deep seated imbalances in the international monetary, financial and trading systems. Most of the migration in modern times is attributable to these imbalances. It would, therefore, be

important to analyze what has been described as ‘the age of mobility’ in this backdrop and address the ensuing wide ranging ramifications accordingly.

To be more specific, the trend of human migration today is predominantly from the developing world to the more affluent countries in the west. Many western governments have welcomed the migrants as they proved worthy contributors to the economies and other considerations of the receiving country.

In recent times however, we notice with concern of a growing aversion to migrants and immigrants. Migrant populations in different parts of the world are being subjected to discrimination and being denied many of their basic rights including cultural rights. I have to say with a sense of regret that the brunt of this discrimination is being felt by Muslims in European and other western societies.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

Since we are discussing this important issue in Geneva being the capital of multilateralism situated in the centre of Europe, I would lend my presentation a deliberate focus on the situation of Muslim migrants to the European continent. It actually represents the most complicated of migrant situations with almost all the attendant economic, political, social and cultural complexities. It may be construed as being riddled with the whole range of aforementioned complexities but it can not in any way be categorized as a new development. The advent of Muslims in Europe can be traced back to the eighth century. History will tell you that Islam was indigenous to Europe for long centuries. In Spain since the 8th century, Jews and Christians found that the encounter with Islam gave them a new insight into their own religious traditions. The advent of Islam in Europe brought along Muslim scholars who were pioneers in various disciplines of sciences. Their knowledge, discoveries, inventions and academic work contributed to the modernization of Europe. From Spain to Turkey they made sterling contributions in arts, sciences and culture. It must be underscored that most of these enlightening

contributions were made in what has been otherwise termed as the dark ages in European history. It, therefore, needs to be emphasized that, through the course of history, migration and subsequent settlement of Muslims in Europe contributed positively and helped evolve the European identity as it stands today.

During eight centuries of Islamic presence in Andalusia, Islamic traditions produced a unique blend of religiosity and a culture of tolerance, as well academic freedom unknown to the rest of Europe at that time. This fact was instrumental to propel Europe on its way to humanism and renaissance. This ideal of the Andalusia tolerance, sadly, did not survive throughout European history, but it did survive in other parts of Europe particularly in the Balkans under the Ottomans. Islam has been indigenous to Southeast Europe for six centuries with deeply engrained traditions and six centuries of pleasant memories.

The Muslim population in Europe is extremely diverse with varied histories and origins. Today, the Muslim-majority regions of Europe are Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and some Russian regions in Northern Caucasus and the Volga region. The indigenous Europeans of the Muslim faith religious tradition dates back several hundred years. The Muslim population in Western Europe is composed of primarily migrants who arrived to the European continent from across the Muslim world during or after the 1950s.

Let me draw attention to some important statistics. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that of the Albanian people, 39% to 70% of those in Albania are Muslim, 91% of them in Kosovo, and 99% of them in Macedonia are Muslim. Bosnia has a Muslim plurality. In Turkey 99%, in Azerbaijan 93% and in Kazakhstan 57% of the population is Muslim respectively. Muslims also form about one fifth of the population of Montenegro.

Muslims in West Europe settle in largely urban areas. Muslim population in selected European cities is as high as 25% in Rotterdam (Netherlands), 24% in Amsterdam

(Netherlands), 20% in Marseille (France), 17% in Brussels (Belgium), 16% in Bradford (UK) while in other important cities like Paris, London and Copenhagen, the figure is 10%.

Some estimates predict that Europe's Muslim population will be doubled by 2020. 85% of Europe's total population growth in 2005 was due to immigration in general. The Muslim population of Europe in 2009 is estimated to be little over 38 million or 5.2 % of the total population of Europe.

Unfortunately, the Muslims of Europe and other parts of the Western world have become suspect because of a campaign launched by a number of motivated individuals and groups who appear to bear an incomprehensible grudge against Muslims and Islam. The Muslim population of Europe that has for centuries lived in peace and harmony with other communities, are today being regarded as aliens. They are under some pressure to give up some of their cultural traits and practices on the ground that these are not compatible with local customs and practices. This has resulted in a growing divide.

The current tension in relations between Islam and the West is pregnant with risk of transforming the notion of clash of civilizations a self-fulfilling prophecy. Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims in the West appears to emanate from different physical appearance of Muslims and also in intolerance toward their religion and cultural beliefs.

I don't see, particularly with the aforementioned historical background, as to why migration of Muslims to Europe and elsewhere in the West should be seen and portrayed as a threat today. Why should they be construed as aliens? Why must the symbols of their identity be denigrated? Why should the expressions of their identity be banned? It is indeed an unfortunate situation that challenges the identity of Muslim migrants. It also defies the salient features of European identity including tolerance, non discrimination and respect for human rights. Most importantly, it poses a clear and present danger to peace, security and stability in the regional as well as the global context.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The most glaring mistake being committed in the wake of the situation to which I have drawn your attention is that instead of finding common grounds, highlighting common values and sharing experiences, identities are being promoted and protected on the basis of differences. This is indeed antithetical to the very essence or the design logic of globalization. It is essential in this era of globalization that issues of cultural and religious diversity be accommodated and accepted as a fact of the new world. It should be considered as an instrument of strength and rapprochement between countries and cultures, with a view to reaching consensus on the set of values necessary to support the global society. Interfaith dialogue should, therefore, aim towards “ethical globalization” in which every culture maintain its integrity at the same time as it contributes to the creation of a humanity seen as one big family sharing common co-existence with mutual respect.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Islamophobia forms a contemporary manifestation of racism. Let me say it clearly. It connotes bad economics and dangerous politics. The present trend of discrimination observed and documented with regard to the migration and integration of Muslims in Europe is ominous. So are its implications for it essentially results in violation of not one or two but the whole range of human rights. In a most dangerous development, Islamophobia is being used as an instrument of electoral politics. This trend needs to be arrested on a priority basis for it could give way to a competition that would be centrifugal to the multicultural world that we all aspire to.

It is in an attempt to cope with this situation that I called for a historic reconciliation between Islam and Christianity as was successfully done between Christianity and Judaism in the 1960. It is high time to do the same between Islam and Christianity. What I am proposing is not a theological exercise, but one which would aim at bringing about an environment of concord, understanding, mutual respect and a sense of living together in harmony and peace.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

The wide ranging issues pertaining to migration in today's world can not be taken lightly. These are serious matters that require serious consideration. They carry the potential to snowball into major crises for the international community. In fact, I believe that among the gravest threats to peace and challenge to security of the present times, is the rise of hatred and intolerance towards religious and cultural diversity. As former British Europe Minister Denis MacShane had put it in his article published in the April 26, 2010 issue of the Newsweek Magazine that “.....*a new politics of intolerance is afoot in Europe and no one knows how to deal with it*”.

I would pay heed to Mr. Mc Shane's warning. The rise in popularity of right wing parties in Europe and their inexplicable aversion to Islam and Muslims appears to be gaining popularity in motivating the ordinary people against the Muslim migrants and immigrants. It is reminiscent of the Jewish migrants to the US in the early 50's and 60's when many were forced to give up their original identity and adopt Anglo Saxon names to escape the prevalent Anti-Semitism. I fear that the same situation may be faced by the Muslims in the face of growing Islamophobia. The outcome of the November 29, 2009 referendum in Switzerland banning construction of minarets in the mosques in that country led to the constitutionalization and legitimization of Islamophobia. A recent article published in a Swiss newspaper by the Swiss People's Party also known as the SVP and UDC last month calling on immigrants in Switzerland to commit themselves in

writing to integrate into the Swiss society by shedding many of the cultural values and religious practices, substantiates my argument and fears.

It is encouraging to note that these concerns are shared by important European institutions. I would like to refer to three paragraphs of the recent resolution No. 1743 adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on June 23, 2010 on this very issue:

Paragraph 9 stipulates: “The Assembly calls on member states to effectively address the social and economic exclusion of Muslims and other minorities in Europe, 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”.

Paragraph 12 stipulates: “The Assembly deplores that a growing number of political parties in Europe exploit and encourage fear of Islam and organise political campaigns which promote negative stereotypes concerning Muslims in Europe and often equate Islam with extremism. It is inadmissible to incite intolerance and sometimes even hatred against Muslims.”

Paragraph 13 stipulates: “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 legitimize restrictions on the rights to freedom of religion and expression which are impermissible under Articles 9 and 10 of the ECHR. 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.”

Let me add however, that that we cannot afford to be put our hands down in despair and despondency and allow the opponents of cultural diversity and inter-communal understanding to have their way.

We cannot turn our eyes away from the rights of migrants and immigrants and let their individual and cultural identities be taken away from them. They are human beings and have to be treated in a humane manner. The provisions of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families Adopted by General Assembly resolution 45/158 of 18 December 1990; The European Convention on the legal status of Migrant Workers of 1977; the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant workers of 2007 and other international instruments, which uphold the human aspect of migrants and protection of their basic rights and cultural identities, should be respected and adhered to by all stakeholders.

Distinguished Participants,

As Secretary General of the OIC, I have been persistent in attempts to build bridges by upholding and prescribing intercultural dialogue. We have made our point at the United Nations, the UN Alliance of Civilizations, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and other institutions. I strongly believe that all stakeholders have to come together to build a culture of tolerance and understanding. In my deliberations and interactions with government leaders, I underscored the point that the case of intercultural dialogue and understanding among cultures must be taken to the grassroots. My call for a historical reconciliation between Islam and Christianity that I have mentioned earlier can be a productive means to achieve a culture of religious tolerance and understanding. The OIC is in the process of organizing a conference on this subject early next year and we will be happy to see effective participation in the conference. In another important initiative, we have established an Islamophobia observatory at the OIC General Secretariat mandated to monitor and document the events pertaining to Islamophobia on a daily basis. I recalled establishment of such an observatory under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was part of the discussion during the Durban Review Conference. I believe, it was an important idea that needs to be revived and materialized in the interest of establishing a monitoring mechanism at the international level.

I would like to end my lecture at this point to allow you to raise your points and to have an exchange of views. But before I do that, I would invite this gathering to seriously consider two questions: Is there an alternative to a world of intercultural diversity? Are we ready to leave for our future generations a world of turmoil and hatred by failing to develop a culture of inter communal peace and harmony? I would think not.

The issue that we are gathered here to discuss today is rooted in the past, confronts us at present and is inextricably linked to our common future. It highlights the importance of building bridges. We must, however, go beyond expressions of good intent and event based calls for inter cultural dialogue and place a premium on cultural diplomacy. Integration and not assimilation must form the objective. Primacy needs to be accorded to multilateralism in this endeavor. The importance of creating and sustaining spaces like this forum can not be over emphasized. We would, other wise, be leaving space to be filled in and the agenda hijacked by the radicals. In the run up to the knowledge society in the global village we need to evolve a new social contract. I would propose that good governance of globalization; sustained, constructive and result oriented engagement on all issues including migration; multiculturalism; and evolution of norms geared towards ensuring respect of human rights of all without discrimination form part of such a contract.

As the second largest international Organization after the United Nations with 57 member states, OIC stands ready and willing to form a credible partner in this endeavor with an open mind and a positive mind set.

I thank you all for your patience.
