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"Criticism of religion is welcome"

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Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu wants to discuss the rules for offending religions. As Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) he is one of the main forces behind the disputed Durban II conference to be held in Copenhagen in April 2009. He was in Copenhagen last week to make a speech at an education conference organised by, among others, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In this connection Jyllands-Posten had the opportunity to address written questions to the Secretary General. Several countries consider boycotting the Durban II conference having the topic freedom of speech and racism, because OIC, with Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu at the head, will try to gain support for a declaration that equates criticism of religion with racism.

Can you explain why you think that criticism of religion can be compared to racism?

"We don't want to ban criticism of religions, and we don't have any problems with criticism as long as it's fair and put forward in a responsible manner. The problem is when religions and their prophets – whether it's Mohammed, Jesus or Moses – are ridiculed and smeared for the purpose of inciting to hatred against those who follow the religion. I'm quite surprised that the Danish press implies that OIC is opponent of freedom of speech or wants to ban criticism of religions. What we say is that incitement to hatred shouldn't be allowed as long as the action is against the UN's declaration on human rights".

In a presentation to the conference OIC describes the Mohammed cartoons and Geert Wilder's film "Fitna" as examples showing that the courts don't protect against offending religions. And the Secretary General Ihsanoglu has previously said that he sees that as deliberate discriminations against 1.3 billion Muslims. And thus OIC wants to discuss international rules for criticism of religion.

Can you give an example of which kind of criticism should be defined as racism in the future?

"We think that incitement to religious hatred is a new kind of racism. Western institutions occupied with Islamophobia agree that Islamophobia is worse than racial discrimination. In practice it's hard to distinguish, but when Muslim immigrants daily are subject to physical and moral assaults in Western countries, it's a negative result of a hate campaign, which has weakened the human rights of Muslim victims. What I mean is that we face a rude campaign of misinformation from extremist parts in the West and from some European

politicians, who have either misunderstood something or have tried to make use of the subject for domestic political benefits by creating an unmotivated fear of "the other".

You have recently stated that there is a "red line" which shouldn't be crossed. What is that supposed to mean and what happens if the red line is crossed?

"There should always be a red line for irresponsible attitude, but we have different boundaries for where freedom ends and responsibility begins. But responsibility begins when there is an action that incites hatred and which is banned by international law. Burning of flags is for example considered as crossing that red line according to many western countries' laws. Thus, the red line should be respected. And that's why I was among the first ones to condemn the burnings of the Danish flag during the demonstrations against Denmark. We are only opponents of criticism of religion if the purpose is to bring the Muslims' rights in danger by creating an atmosphere of hatred and spreading prejudices, and that's what international law forbids."

Whether Denmark will attend the conference has not been decided yet, but the Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller has previously said that it doesn't make any sense to attend if the Muslim countries will use their majority to remove freedom of speech, while Socialist People's Party leader Villy Søvndal wants Denmark to boycott the conference. Furthermore, 500 Danish cultural personalities have recently signed a protest against Denmark's participation. Among the signers are integration consultant and writer Manu Sareen, film director Jørgen Leth, brain researcher Peter Lund Madsen and writer Frederik Stjernefelt. They think the conference should be stopped, because they fear losing their right to think, believe and speak freely.

FULL TEXT OF THE ANSWERS OF THE OIC SECRETARY GENERAL SENT TO JYLLANDS POSTEN AS REPLIES TO THEIR WRITTEN QUESTIONS

Can you explain why You believe that critique of religion can be defined as racism?

First of all let me be very clear on one point. We are neither against criticism of any religion nor calling for banning criticism of religions. History of religions, including Islam, is a history of criticism and debates which led to the formation of different sects and schools of thought. These debates have always been there at the academic, scholarly, or theological level. As for the debates which are conducted at the level of public opinion, we have no problem with any criticism, as long as they are objectives, fair and conducted in a responsible manner.

The problems start when religious beliefs of individuals belonging to any religion or venerated personalities of that religion a.i. prophets, whether Mohammed, Jesus or Moses, are ridiculed, denigrated and targeted with campaigns of insults with apparent or declared intent to incite hatred against the followers of this or that religion. I am quite surprised to see in the Danish press insinuations that I or the OIC are opponents of freedom of

expression who are endeavoring to stifle this freedom by calling for banning of criticism of religions.

Everybody is entitled to criticize anybody or anything. How it is going to be done is completely up to one's own norms, values and style of expressing his or her own ideas. We have no problem whatsoever with this. However, when freedom of expression is abused to ridicule and demonize with the intention to sow seeds of hatred against a group of peoples or citizens, then problems start because the rights of the victims of this incitement comes to the fore. It is not only OIC or OIC member states and myself who are expressing this understanding. I believe that starting from UN Secretary General and UN High Representative of Alliance of Civilizations and many dignitaries in the Western countries have raised the same opinion. Moreover, the international community have given their frank endorsement to this opinion, through resolutions adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Human Rights Council, by large majority. This is tantamount to say that this opinion is the opinion of the international community and the international legitimacy.

Can You give an example of a what kind of critique that should be defined as racism?

We believe that incitement to religious hatred on religious basis is a new form of racism. The Western institutions dealing with Islamophobia are unanimous in saying that the phenomenon of Islamophobia is worse than racial discrimination. In practical terms, in many instances it is difficult to determine what constitutes incitement to religious or racial hatred, which are both proscribed under the international human rights instruments. For example when a Muslim immigrant is discriminated against or physically attacked by extremists, the causes could be on racial or religious grounds or both. The daily attacks, physical or moral assaults against Muslims throughout the West is the proof of the negative effect of this hate speech campaign which has resulted in eroding human rights of those Muslim victims.

We should not forget that Anti-Semitism which caused horrendous tragedies for the European Jews last century can not be explained technically or lexically as a discrimination based only on race since the Jews who were subject to the inhuman treatments were mainly Europeans from different parts of the continent. This was also because of their religious affiliations. Within the same context, one should realize that the Palestinians who have been suffering from a grave tragedy for the last 60 years are ethnically Semitic but what happens to them is not defined as Anti-Semitism. What I am saying is that discrimination is discrimination whether on religious or racial grounds. I believe we are facing a gross campaign of disinformation on the part of some extremist quarters in the West and some European politicians who have either wrong understanding of the matter or trying to exploit the issue for domestic political gains by creating an uncalled-for fear of the "other".

Why should it not be possible to criticize a religion?

In my previous answers, I tried to explain my views in this regard. If I may elaborate, I can add the following. Criticism of religions is there for centuries. Trying to humiliate, insult others, and jeopardize their basic human rights based on their religious beliefs, particularly

in the case of Muslims whose religion is followed by 1.5 billion people, is understood as an act which fall outside the borders of critical dialogue or civilized criticism.

Narrowing down the discussion on the freedom of expression to the freedom to be able to even denigrate the most sacred religious values is neither civilized nor intellectual. Yet, at the diplomatic level, we are not even focusing on this aspect. What we are saying is that incitement for hatred should not be allowed, as long as this specific act constitutes a crime within the parameters of international human rights documents, particularly article 20 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which requests the governments to take measures at the national level against incitement to religious hatred.

What we are also advocating is that we should all abide not only by the domestic laws or if there exists any, blasphemy laws or any code of conduct or ethics regulations, but also by the internationally agreed legal instruments.

According to The Washington Post You recently said that there is a "red line" that should not be crossed. What do you mean by that? And what will happen if the "red line" is crossed?

I think, there has always been and there should be a red line for any irresponsible attitude, whether it is on the individual or group of peoples levels. Nobody can deny that in the exercise of any particular freedom, one should act with a sense of responsibility. We might differ on the limits of where freedom stops and where responsibility starts. I would like to remind that all legal documents always strike a balance between freedoms and responsibility. With regard to freedom of expression the responsibility starts when there is an act of incitement to hatred proscribed by the international law. It is important to recall that the provision of freedom under human rights, the freedom of expression is the only freedom which is linked with responsibility.

As for the red lines, I would like to say that national flag for example is a sacrosanct symbol representing nationhood and sovereignty. Burning of a national flag is considered a red line proscribed by law even in many Western societies. This red line should be respected by others if they want to have cordial relations with that nation. If you say that where I was when the Danish flags were burnt and diplomatic premises attacked during the demonstrations against Denmark in some OIC member states, I reply by saying that I was among the first who condemned these practices as well as the violence surpassing the limits of peaceful reactions.

What we are against is not the criticism of religion perse but rather the intended objective of this criticism which is, in this case, jeopardize Muslim rights, by creating an atmosphere of hostility and rancor which make their life unsafe and strewn with prejudices of all kinds, and this is what international law prohibits. This would go against the values of living as a globalized human family. What humanity is in dire need is to foster a culture of peace based on mutual respect, understanding and dialogue among civilizations and cultures.