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COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, SCIENCE AND EDUCATION

Hearing on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe

Rapporteur: Mr Mogens Jensen, Denmark, Socialist Group

Copenhagen, Tuesday, 8 September 2009 at 3pm

Danish Parliament (Folketinget)
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1. Introduction

Islam is the second largest religion in Europe and a prominent component of European societies. In certain member states of the Council of Europe, it is traditionally the religion professed by the majority of the population, while in others it is the religion of the majority of immigrants and of citizens with an immigrant background. Islam has become part of the religious landscape and cultural heritage of Europe. Despite this, Islam is rarely considered a part of Europe; rather it is regarded as an external element. Does Islam have difficulties to integrate itself in Europe? Does this issue raise an inherent conflict of values?

It is important to be aware of the confusion between Islam and **Islamism**. For those who are not familiar with Islam, there can be great confusion between the two terms, which can be mistaken as being synonymous. However, Islamism designates an ideology which aims to solve all social and political problems by the application of Islamic law, the sharia, which is considered the only source for organising and legislating a state. It may be imbued with a deep antagonism towards non-Muslims and is particularly hostile towards the West. Thus, Islamism cannot be regarded as a religion but instead a radical ideology, which pursues a model of society incompatible with the values and institutions of a democratic Europe. However, Islamism is not a unified movement and not all forms of extremism endorse the use of violence to achieve their political goals.

Islamophobia is the blanket rejection of everything which is perceived to relate to Islam, and is expressed through acts of racism and discrimination against Muslims. Islamophobia is a manifestation of intolerance and discrimination, incompatible with European values. Islamophobia is induced by simplifications, clichés and negative stereotypes which fail to distinguish between Islam and Islamism, Muslims and Islamists. Furthermore, Islamophobia does not differentiate between religion, culture and nationality, thus also encompassing xenophobia. However, criticism of Islam does not necessarily constitute Islamophobia.

The hearing in Copenhagen will thoroughly examine the role of Islam and Islamic culture in contemporary society. A series of measures should be taken to condemn and combat all forms of extremism in order to ensure respect for all persons, regardless of their religion, by guaranteeing the primacy of law, separation of church and state, and human rights. The hearing in Copenhagen aims to:

- make greater efforts to increase knowledge about Islam, human rights and European values among Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe;
- put an end to the confusion made by many between Islam as a religious faith and a cultural system, and Islamism as a political ideology;
- put an end to the confusion made by many between Islamophobia, which should be rejected, and criticism of Islam, which should be accepted;
- address, by way of an open debate, on the one hand, the erroneous stereotype of Muslims in Europe, and on the other hand, certain religious or cultural practices that are contrary to European values and the domestic law of European democracies;
- focus on the causes of extremism, and condemn both Islamism and Islamophobia, in all its forms in this context.

The Copenhagen hearing will address Islamism and Islamophobia as well as discuss Islam as a religious faith. Furthermore, discussions will examine how Islam and Muslims may be further integrated into European society.

2. Islamism and Islamophobia

In relation to the growth of European Muslim communities, there has been a significant rise of Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe. What are the causes of Islamism and Islamophobia? Why does Islamism exert a significant influence on some Muslims in Europe? To what extent is Islamism a distortion of Islam? How can European states oppose these forms of extremism?

Islamism and Islamophobia are extremist forces and contrary to the values of the Council of Europe. Unfortunately, it is undeniable that today Islamism exerts a significant influence on some people. The rise of this extremist movement can be partly attributed to the destabilisation of individuals and communities through social and economic exclusion from society. Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, Islamism has become an important subject of study and controversy. Manifestations of radicalism in some Islamic communities can partly explain the rise of Islamophobia in Europe: indeed these forces are interdependent.

Is Islamophobia the appropriate term to describe racism against Muslim? Does the word Islamophobia attempt to prohibit any criticism of Islam?

The use of the word Islamophobia does not mean to establish an absolute censorship, the effect of which would be to prohibit any criticism of Islam. Such censorship would be contrary to the democratic values of Europe in relation to freedom of expression. As the European Court of Human Rights famously stated: "Freedom of expression ... is applicable not only to information or ideas that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population".¹

It is of the utmost importance that society denounces irrational fear towards Islam, which is often caused by ignorance in respect of Islam, and furthermore to condemn the blanket rejection by Muslims of anything which is perceived not to be compatible with Islam. It is therefore necessary to analyse the causes of extremism in this context, to reduce the potential attraction that Islamism has on Muslims in Europe, and eradicate Islamophobia.

3. Islam and the European democracies

Is Islam compatible with the European values and institutions? What is the relationship between religion and society in respect of Islam in a European democracy? To what extent is European society open to religion?

Freedom of religion is protected by numerous international conventions including the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights provides for the protection of freedom of religion, however this guarantee is not an absolute right. Under paragraph two of Article 9, member states may limit an individual's right to manifest his religion or beliefs provided that "such limitations are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others".²

Some of the debates which have emerged on the role of Islam in contemporary Europe have provoked anxiety. These debates are sometimes so tense that they threaten social peace and dialogue among communities. Difficulties emerge when one observes certain cultural and patriarchal practices of Muslims across Europe which are contrary to European values and the law of European democracies: for example inequality between men and women, honour killings, polygamy, forced marriages. The status of women in Islam is a principal issue which must be addressed in adapting Islam to a modern democratic Europe.

Can Islam adopt European values? How to be a Muslim in Europe today? To what extent are religious values found in European society? What form should Islam take to ensure compatibility with a democratic Europe?

Divisions between Islam and democratic Europe are primarily based on principles and ethical norms derived from a text or tradition articulating the moral values of Islam. However this conflict of values is not reserved to Islam, but is rather a phenomenon that concerns all religions. It is important to initiate a debate on the role of religion in European democracies: should religion be part of an individual's private life or the public sphere?

¹ Handyside v The United Kingdom, 7 December 1979, § 49.

² The European Convention on Human Rights, 4 November 1950, article 9.

How to integrate further Islam and Muslims into the European society? Would the establishment of a centre in Europe for the training of Imams be effective in ensuring the integration of Islam in society?

The importance of education is undoubtedly crucial to promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue, and it is necessary to make further efforts to strengthen the knowledge of Islam amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe. In the majority of European countries, courses in religion are provided at school for children; however there is sometimes a tendency to limit such education to the Catholic or Protestant religions. It is important to provide education about Islam, as well as to ensure that European values are also taught.

The training of Imams in Europe is often presented as a solution for integrating Islam into European democracies. Today, Imams are mostly trained outside Europe and when they arrive in their host countries often do not know the national language, and furthermore are not familiar with European culture and values. Aside from a comprehensive understanding of Islamic culture, it is important that Imams have a good knowledge of the language, culture, institutions and the values of the host country. Given that Muslims represent a significant proportion of the European population, it would be beneficial that those Imams who practise in Europe, come from communities within Europe. Imams trained in Europe could preach an Islam reconciled with democratic values and the legal system prevailing in Europe. The presence of Imams in mosques, who have been trained in Europe, would help to integrate Islam into society.

Draft programme

1. Opening of the hearing by Mrs Anne Brasseur, Chairperson of the Committee

- Statement by Mogens Lykketoft, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Denmark
- Introduction by Mogens Jensen, member of the Folketinget and PACE committee on culture, science and education

2. Clarification of the terms “Islam”, “Islamism” and “Islamophobia”

- Prof. Dr Mehdi Mozaffari, Head of the Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR), Aarhus University, Denmark

3. The relationship between religion and state in European society

- Caroline Fourest, journalist and sociologist

4. The rise of extremism movements in Europe

Islamism and its influence on European Muslims and the rise of Islamophobia in Europe

- Manni Crone, senior researcher, research unit on political violence, terrorism and radicalisation, Danish institute for international studies

5. How to be Muslim in modern Europe?

- Prof. Dr Bassam Tibi, political scientist, Professor of International Relations, University of Göttingen, Germany
- Talip Kucukcan, Associate Professor of Sociology, Political, Economic and Social Research Foundation, Ankara

6. General discussion

7. Closing of the hearing