



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 9

**Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related  
forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation  
of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action**

### **Written statement\* submitted by North-South XXI, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 February 2011]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## Islamophobia in Western Europe

North-South XXI is concerned with the growing phenomena of Islamophobia and the hatred of Muslims in Western Europe. Islamophobia or the fear of Islam and the hatred of Muslims are characterized by misinformation and misunderstanding of Islam and its teachings. Islamophobic discourse claims to be targeting militant Islamic movements, however, the effects of this dangerous discourse make no such distinction. It targets all Muslim groups including citizens and long-time resident Muslim communities. Western European Muslim communities like the Turks and the West and North-African immigrants lived in Europe for generations. These communities and their ancestors were in fact encouraged by Western European governments to settle in the continent in the aftermath of World War I and II as cheap migrant labour used to rebuild Europe's destroyed economies. Since then the Muslim communities contributed immensely to the reconstruction and socio-economic well-fare of Western Europe.

Islamophobia and the hatred of Muslims are nourished by malicious media campaigns which associate Muslims with political movements that resort to militant interpretation of Islamic teachings or violence. This mistaken association is propagated despite the fact that Islam abhors violence against civilians under any pretext including during times of war. It is also noteworthy that average individuals, among the 1.5 billion Muslims of the world, are neither linked with militant Islamic movements nor condone their practices. The campaign against Islam and Muslims in Western Europe takes different forms ranging from the defamation of Islam and vilifying Muslim personalities through the print and audio-visual material to the prohibition of Muslim religious and cultural symbols. Islamophobia and the hatred of Muslims are often fostered by racism, discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiments.

It is observed that anti-Islam, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab political rhetoric witness major increase during times of national or local elections in Western Europe. Far-right political parties appeal to voters on comprehensive plans for socio-economic, cultural and political change that reject the existing systems and purport to preserve European identity and idiosyncratic values against intrusion of foreigners. Rising unemployment levels and cuts in governments' spending caused by economic and financial hardships faced by Western Europe are also noticed as triggers of Islamophobic incidents and crimes. Right-wing parties target foreigners especially Muslims in order to increase their electoral audience believing that the propagation of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim political rhetoric is a major factor in their electoral success. This strategy is reminiscent of the propaganda used by the Nazi and the Fascist elements in the 1930s to control governments and to prepare for wars that caused one of the greatest tragedies during the period 1939-1945.

Right-wing and ultra-nationalists political parties such as the Party for Freedom (Netherlands), Swedish Democrats (Sweden), Danish People's Party (Denmark), German People's Party (Germany), Freedom Party (Austria), Front National (France), the Northern League (Italy), the British National Party (UK) and the Tea Party (USA), are increasingly represented in parliaments or exercising noticeable influence on the legislative and executives in their respective countries. The right-wing Swiss People's Party is the largest political block in the Swiss parliament. These political parties are calling for a halt to immigration from Muslim countries, ban on construction of new mosques and Minarets and prohibition of Niqab, Hijab and Burka (which are dresses wearied by conservative Muslim women). French President Nicolas Sarkozy's aggressive public stand against the Burka reveals growing intolerance among European politicians toward Muslims.

Below are some Islamophobic incidents that merit particular attention:

On July 1, 2007 Mrs Marwa al-Sherbini, a 32 years old Egyptian pharmacist, was stabbed to death in a German courtroom. Her attacker, who did not hide his anti-Muslim sentiments, was condemned in a previous trial for insulting her for wearing a Muslim headscarf. This grave crime attracted little attention in Europe, and instead the media focused attention on issues of court security rather than the Islamophobic motivation of the killer. On 25 August 2010 Mr. Ahmed Sharif, a 43 years old cabdriver in New York, was stabbed in an anti-Muslim attack. His attacker Michael Enright asked him about his religion and when he mentioned the word Muslim, his attacker stabbed him with a knife. Two days after this crime an African-American man was attacked in Manhattan by protesters against the construction of an Islamic community center near Ground Zero in New York.

In August 2010, Mr. Thilo Sarrazin a former high-ranking government official published an anti-Muslim book entitled "Germany Does Away with Itself" in which he claimed that "Muslims threaten European societies and that Germans are in danger of becoming strangers in their own country." Mr. Sarrazin admitted that his book might encourage racist and right-wing views. German Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned Mr. Sarrazin's book, yet on 18 October 2010 she was quoted saying that Germany's experience to build a multicultural nation had "failed, utterly failed" thus tremendously boosting an increasingly hostile public debate about Muslim immigrants in Germany.

In July 2010 the Dove World Outreach Center, a nondenominational church in Florida (USA), announced what it termed "International Burn a Quran Day" to commemorate the 9th anniversary of September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Pastor Terry Jones, the mastermind behind this initiative, said that: "We believe that Islam is of the devil ... it is a deceptive religion, it is a violent religion." Such outrageous act was averted after intervention from numerous individuals and groups including President Barak Obama and the US's National Association of Evangelicals who warned that such an act could cause worldwide tension among Muslims and Christians.

Following his anti-Islam film "fitna" of 2008, Netherland's right-wing politician Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom, is planning to publish an anti-Muslim book in 2011. He claims that the book would be "about how to better fight the Islamisation of the world." He indicated that the release of this book would be the first step in the establishment of the 'International Freedom Alliance' a worldwide anti-Islam forum.

On 29 November 2009 the Swiss voters decided, in a public referendum, to ban the construction of Minarets. The referendum was called for by the Swiss People's Party and supported by 57% of voters and 22 of Switzerland's 26 cantons. This vote represents an assault against religious freedom targeting Muslims as a specific religious minority. Pope Benedict XVI deplored the vote and considered it an offense against inter-religious dialogue and an act that hampers efforts to narrow differences and to promote understanding that preserves peace and justice in the world.

The ban of the Minarets in Switzerland fostered hostility towards Muslims and encouraged Islamophobic parties like the Front National, British National Party, Party for Freedom (Netherlands), Northern League to make similar demands. Some newspapers like the Daily Express and Daily Star published a series of anti-Muslims commentaries in the UK. Following the public intervention of President Sarkozy in which he criticized those who condemned the Swiss vote to ban the construction of the Minarets, opinion polls in France, Italy, Spain, Holland and Germany showed considerable increase in Islamophobic sentiments and the number of Europeans supporting total ban on the construction of Minarets and/or Mosques. In a YouGov survey of 32,000 voters during Euro Parliament Elections of June 2009, 44% of British voters approved the statement that: "Even in its milder forms, Islam is a serious danger to western civilisation" and only 32% disagreed

with it. In France, an official survey indicated that 46% voters opposed the construction of Minarets and 41% opposed the construction of any new mosques.

Since 2004, hundreds of Muslim places of worship and community centers were either burned down by arsonist right-wing extremist groups, defiled with insulting texts and neo-Nazi graffiti or desecrated with manure and blood. Such criminal incidents were reported in Germany, Netherlands, France, Switzerland, UK, Israel and USA.

## **Conclusion**

1. The growing popularity of ultra-right-wing and Islamophobic political parties in Western Europe is a serious threat to Europe's traditions of tolerance, freedom, liberalism and equality. Self-centric and intolerant political agendas proffered by these groups endanger the foundation of Western Europe's liberal democracies. It would also put in peril peaceful co-existence among the different religions and negatively affect international cooperation between Muslim and European nations.

2. Propagation of Islamophobic discourse represents a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and regional and international human rights treaties. It would eventually compromise the status of Western Europe as key actor in the multilateral negotiations system and custodian of some international agencies including the UN human rights system.

3. Propagation of Islamophobia and hatred of Muslims is a dangerous phenomenon which is increasingly associated with violence and hate crimes. Such propagation cannot, therefore, be considered a question of freedom of expression but rather as a crime under law such as anti-Semitism and incitation to racial hatred and violence.

4. Combating Islamophobia is the responsibility of governments. They need to introduce comprehensive educational, legislative and institutional programmes as well as legal action against individuals and groups that propagate Islamophobic doctrines. At the international level, combating Islamophobia requires a resourceful campaign that involves the UN, governments, academia, civil society groups and the written and audio-visual media.

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