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Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe

Committee Opinion

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

Rapporteur: Mr Mike HANCOCK, United Kingdom, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Political Affairs Committee takes note of the report by Mr Mogens Jensen on “Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia in Europe”, in which the Committee on Culture, Science and Education deals with a serious political problem. The Political Affairs Committee is in general in agreement with the thrust of the draft resolution and draft recommendation. It feels, however, that these texts could be improved.

2. If some Islamism is indeed extremist and violent, there is also mainstream and peaceful Islamism. As the explanatory memorandum correctly states Islamism is a “political ideology aiming to apply Islamic principles in the world”. An Islamist therefore does not accept the separation between religion and state, which is fundamental in Europe, and considers Islam not only as a religion but also as a social, legal and political code of conduct. The Assembly already dealt with extremism for instance in its [Resolution 1605 \(2008\)](#) and [Recommendation 1831 \(2008\)](#) on European Muslim communities confronted with extremism. The Political Affairs Committee has dealt further with it in Mr Agramunt’s report on “Fight against extremism: achievements, deficiencies and failures”. Most Islamists refuse violence and act in perfect legality.

3. The texts under consideration do not refer to the difference between the fear of Islam and discrimination against Muslims on the grounds of their religion. Whereas fear stems mainly from lack of awareness and from negative perceptions associating Islam with violence and cannot be suppressed in the short term, discrimination is unacceptable and should be combated. The Assembly should take this opportunity to express its concern about how many European governments seem to be failing to address the problem of Islamism, and are therefore paving the way for Islamophobia and for extremist xenophobic parties. The results of the recent general election in the Netherlands is a good example of this.

4. I would also like to add references to the liberal Muslim reformers and Islamic peace movements who wish to reconcile Islam with democracy, human rights, rule of law and the separation between the state and religion and are actually accused of Islamophobia by the Islamists. European democratic structures should support them much more than they do. The draft resolution presented by the Committee on Culture, Science and Education states, rightly, that “stereotypes, misunderstandings and fears with regard to Islam are typical symptoms of a widespread lack of adequate knowledge among non-Muslims in Europe”. It could go on to point out the important, but often negative, role played by the mass media in this respect. Without prejudice to freedom of expression, the media could be encouraged to take a more positive approach.

5. Throughout the draft resolution and draft recommendation, Muslims are often identified with migrants, which is not always the case. On the contrary, those who once decided to leave their countries and settle in Europe are in general very respectful of the values upheld by the Council of Europe. It is often – although not exclusively – the second generation, together with those who convert to Islam, who are more vocal against such values, which are seen as part of “western decadence”. In addition, some member states of the Council of Europe are Muslim. The Council of Europe accepted them as members because they were ready to espouse the principles of democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law.



6. Referring to the burqa or the niqab, the committee rightly states that the veiling of women is not a religious obligation but a social and cultural tradition. It refers, however, to these as “religious clothing” and states that a ban would go against freedom of religion. In many European countries the veiling of women, in particular the full veiling by the burqa or the niqab, is perceived as a symbol of subjugation of women, as the report states. Therefore, legislation to forbid the burqa and the niqab would address a symbol but not the real problem. As *The Economist* rightly puts it “the three arguments for a ban – security, sexual equality and secularism – do not stand up. On security, women can be required to lift their veils if necessary. On sexual equality, women would be better protected by the enforcement of existing laws against domestic violence than by the enactment of new laws forcing them to dress in a way that may be against their will. On secularism, even if Europeans would prefer not to have others’ religiosity paraded on the streets, the tolerance that Westerners claim to value requires them to put up with it”.¹

7. The call on Switzerland to enact a moratorium on and repeal its general prohibition on the building of minarets seems premature. The result of the Swiss public initiative should indeed be regretted. However, there is no consensus on whether or not it discriminates Muslim communities in their exercise of freedom of religion. There are applications pending before the European Court of Human Rights, which should take position on the issue. It seems therefore too early to make recommendations on it.

8. In order to make the texts clearer, the Political Affairs Committee proposes the following amendments to the draft texts presented. Your rapporteur thanks Mr Jensen, rapporteur for report, for his availability to discuss the proposed amendments. It has thus been possible to reduce substantially the number of initially envisaged amendments and to reformulate most of those retained in a way that makes them acceptable to Mr Jensen.

B. Proposed amendments

Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

Replace paragraph 1 by the following:

“The Parliamentary Assembly notes that Islamic radicalism and manipulation of religious beliefs for political reasons oppose human rights and democratic values. At the same time, in many Council of Europe member states, Muslims feel socially excluded, stigmatised and discriminated against; they become victims of stereotypes, social marginalisation and political extremism. The Assembly is deeply concerned about Islamic extremism as well as about extremism against Muslim communities in Europe. Both phenomena reinforce each other.”

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

After paragraph 1 add the following new paragraph:

“The Assembly recalls that Islamism is the view that Islam is not only a religion but also a social, legal and political code of conduct. Islamism can be violent or mainstream and peaceful, but in both cases it does not accept the separation between religion and state which is a fundamental principle of the democratic and pluralistic societies. The Assembly also recalls that discrimination against Muslims is unacceptable and must be combated. A great majority of European Muslims share the principles at the basis of our societies and it is essential to fight against Islamophobia, stemming mainly from lack of awareness and from negative perceptions associating Islam with violence. Failing to address these issues, many European governments pave the way to the rise of extremism.”

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 2 delete the words “as well as the pre-eminence of written norms ensured through a last judgment”.

1. “Banning the burqa: a bad idea”, *The Economist*, 15-21 May 2010.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 7 in the second sentence, replace “migrants” by “citizens of Muslim religion, in particular migrants,”.

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 9 replace the words “It is equally necessary that migrants belonging to a minority culture in their host country do not isolate themselves and do not attempt to develop a parallel society. Thus the Assembly calls on the representatives of the Muslim communities to encourage intercultural dialogue and understanding of the cultural background of the host country ...” by “It is necessary that persons belonging to a minority culture in their country do not isolate themselves and do not attempt to develop a parallel society. Thus the Assembly calls on the representatives of the Muslim communities to encourage intercultural dialogue ...”.

Amendment F (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 9 delete the word “political” before the word “extremism”.

Amendment G (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 15 replace “Genital” by “Female genital”.

Amendment H (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 15 replace the words “violates the right to physical and moral integrity of individuals and especially children under Article 8 of the ECHR and should be regarded as inhuman and degrading treatment under its Article 3. Member states must do their utmost to combat this practice” by “should be considered as a crime as it violates the right to physical and moral integrity of individuals and especially children. Member states must do their utmost to put an end to this crime ...”.

Amendment I (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 17 replace “Inter-religious education” by “Teaching about religions”.

Proposed amendments to the draft recommendation

Amendment J (to the draft recommendation)

In paragraph 1 replace “extremism” by “attacks against the values it upholds”.

Amendment K (to the draft recommendation)

At the end of paragraph 2 add the following words:

“The Council of Europe should also seek to encourage other parts of the world to adopt and promote the values it upholds”.

Amendment L (to the draft recommendation)

In sub-paragraph 3.2 replace the words “public lifelong education and that institutions of higher education and research in Europe provide Islamic studies in order to educate religious scholars, teachers and leaders and distinguish Islam from Islamism” by “lifelong education and that institutions of higher education and research in Europe provide Islamic studies in order to educate religious scholars, teachers and leaders”.

Amendment M (to the draft recommendation)

At the end of paragraph 3.5 add the following sentence: “In this context the Assembly welcomes the accession of Morocco and Cape Verde to the North-South Centre”.