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Europa, Central Asia and Islam - New Challenges for Stability Policies

Dear colleagues,

thinking and talking about, what is called the European “Joint Foreign and Security Policy” (GASP) and “European Zone of Stability” one has to pay attention to a very important new aspect:

Besides **external** security challenges, the **essential** questions of European stability are linked to the processes of transformation and state building in the vast post-socialist, respectively post-soviet regions which became part of the political space of the OSCE twelf years ago after the collaps of the USSR.

Here, the question of stability is related to the course, these processes are taking: whether they proceed successful or fail, whether they continue peacefully and evolutionary or disruptive and confrontational.

It is important to underline that these processes are of **internal** nature.

Looked at European security from that new perspective, the critical areas can be found at the Balkans, and in the Asian and Caucasian regions of the new geopolitical space of the OSCE.

I would like to focus my attention on Central Asia, and here I am going to analyse two of the most sensitive questions deciding over the success or failure of the processes of transformation and state building in this region –

first, the relationship between the ruling secular regimes and, what I call, the “Islam factor”, and

second, Europes capability of redefining its own relationship towards Islam and its political representative in Central Asia as well as of playing a balancing role between them and the Central Asian secular regimes.

Analysing this relationship, we shall be finding a number of important issues and stumbling stones that allow me to elaborate also on the broader topic of Islam-West (Europe) relations.

What is new for Europe after it has admitted the five Central Asian states to the OSCE?

1. From a a geo-political perspective, it has obtained a *Euro-Asian dimension*.

What does that mean in religious and civilisatory terms?

In Central Asia, the Caspian Basin and in the Caucasus, Islam is the dominant religion. Sixty-three per cent of the population in Kazakhstan, 82 in Uzbekistan and more than 90 in Tajikistan profess, “there is no other God than God, Allah”.

Although there exists differentiation from country to country, in total we are talking about a

population potential of 40 peoples with a total population of roughly 57 million people which is connected to Islam and its influence in culture, values, social norms and, partially, also to its political way of expression.

As far as Russia is concerned, estimates assume that in some thirty years 30 to 40 million Muslims will live there.

Henceforth, this gives Europe its own Euro-Asiatic Orient as well as its own Euro-Asiatic Islam.

2. The impact of current developments:

With the settlement of the conflict in neighbouring Afghanistan, the last Iron Curtain of the Soviet period has been taken down so that Central Asia is no longer separated from its Islamic neighbours.

Brigades over the Pjanj border river are built, governments think about new roads to Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, mine fields are removed. In other words:

Central Asia has become the Eurasian bridge into the traditional Islamic world and is thus accessible by *both sides*.

No one can say today what the consequences of this will be for the *Islamic* face of central Asia or what retro-active effects it will have on Europe and the post-Soviet area.

The conclusion is: The population, the elites and the forces related to Islam, thus, continue to be of **permanent strategic importance with respect to civilization and politics in the Euro-Asian area.**

As a result, addressing the “phenomenon of Islam” will, from now on, become an issue directly related to European security also in its own political area.

3. The politicization of the “Islam factor”¹ is inevitable.

This is my main thesis when thinking about Islam in Central Asia.

This politicization is brought about by structural development processes, which are primarily connected with a number of factors related to the formation of statehood, the question of the socio-political orientation of the young Central Asian states and to the economic and socio-political transformation processes after obtaining independence in 1991.

Which factors make secular - Islam relations to become the center of attention?

First, national identity and Islam cannot be divided from one another in the states of Central Asia, which have not yet been completely transformed.

Second, the transformation and state-forming processes also remain complicated which makes socio-political tensions inevitable.

Third, the dispute between politics and religion is primarily between secular government leaders and the followers of political Islam.

¹ “Islam factor” is used as a technical term here which combines the totality of the factors connected with and emerging from Islam.

Fourth, the dissatisfaction of the population due to the rapid deterioration of the social situation is already today being exploited by radical Islamic movements against the secular regimes and some of these groups are also demanding that secular regimes be replaced by an Islamic state.

Fifth, secular leaders rule out reforms that favour democracy and the rule of law, and, most important, reforms of an outfashioned concepts of secularism and policy on religion inherited by them from the Soviet period.

The way which one addresses these complicated processes will determine whether secular-Islamic relations in the states of central Asia remain stable or whether they will turn into a confrontation of civilizations.

Currently, nothing indicates that the CA governments and Europe, including the OSCE, are taken adequate account of this.

So, another new important element for the situation of Europe is that it cannot escape Islamic social opposition in its political Euro-Asian space of the OSCE.

Summarizing this situation, one must come to the following

conclusion: If strategic stability shall be maintained in Central Asia which is highly important in geopolitical, economic and energy terms, one must prevent that social and ideological conflicts turn into a political antagonism.

Therefore, Europe must make a new start in its relationship to Islam in its own political area.

This will only be possible if Europe perceives Islam and Islamic political movements in the Asian part of the OSCE area as an **organic element** of the societies there, **not as an alien element**, and **not as a subject of political tactics**.

It has to draw strategic conclusions.

Unfortunately, European security policy is lacking a strategic approach for dealing with Islam. The prevailing treatment of this issue occurs primarily in the context of providing freedom of religion as part of the Western human rights concept, and in the context of the fight against terrorism which is dominated by military and security policy, in short, repressive means.

One should say it bluntly: in Europe, and also within the OSCE member states, there exists a conceptual vacuum with regard to dealing with the **Asian “island of non-Christian culture”** in its own political region.

Dominant voices in Europe argue that Islamic participation in state building in the OSCE region present a principle, a civilizationary threat and is, therefore, not in the interest of Europe.

However, if these prejudices could be countered and overcome, a completely new perspective would open up for Europe toward its Muslim neighbouring regions.

At present, the driving force appears to lie in imposing the values of the OSCE and Western civilizationary self-understanding to these Muslim societies through the OSCE acquis. The notion that this can be achieved is, however, an illusion.

Rather, Europe and the OSCE should reformulate their relation to political Islam. It is therefore advisable that the social potential behind Islam be acknowledged and also used as a strategic factor for the stability policies of the OSCE.

In a nutshell, the question that requires an answer is: How is a stability policy to be formulated in the OSCE region with regard to the “island of non-Christian culture” with a Muslim majority?

This question needs to be answered by European security policy with an integrative strategy of adapting the Islamic factor into the European stability area. September 11, at the latest, made it clear that this is indispensable.

The key is the view that stability in the Euro-Asian region can only be ensured through a common civilizational perspective of its peoples and nations. This does not mean giving up respective values, but rather developing a relationship of co-operation and co-existence. Herein lies the experience and constructive political strength of Europe and the OSCE.

Facing this challenge, the initial questions on the relationship to Islam must be asked in a different way:

- Must the Islamic factor be an element of the OSCE’s co-operative security and stabilization strategies for its Euro-Asian region?
- Can it be integrated to play a constructive role internally and externally?
- Can civilian Islamic opposition be a “normal opposition” in the democratic sense, and what would the requirements for this be?
- Can the Muslim population, Islamic activists, and Western politicians reach a common political basic consensus that is founded on the idea of coexistence, intelligent adaptation of modern principles, as well as the OSCE norms and values?
- If so, how would one structure such a consensus?

Dear colleagues,
looked at from such a standpoint, the prevailing strategy on terror turns out as being extremely unproductive.

In this context, allow me, to turn to some broader aspects of the strategy on terror and Islam-European relations.

First, Let me explain my criticism of the current strategy:

My main concern is that the **one-sided** military and security oriented strategy has led the international community into a **crisis of regulation** of the conflict.

What are the elements of this crisis?

Point one: The current strategy does not answer the **basic question**:

- what is the character of the threat?
- Is it the so called “asymetric military threat” or is it the political aims and goals pursued by the “enemy”? Or is it both?

As long as these basic questions remain unanswered, the necessity of a political resolution of the conflict leading us back to peace remains dominated by the current military approach.

Furthermore, as long as the character and concrete points of dispute are not identified, the question about the **character and terms of reference of peace** remain in the dark.

- What has to be talked about?
- Which concrete matters of dispute have to be resolved?

Point two: The current strategy does not remove a single structural cause that led and leads to war. Here, I am not speaking about long term causes, as poverty, underdevelopment, so called reform deficits etc. The need of their removal is widely recognised and has to be implemented.

I am also not talking about **basics** which rank at the **top** of causes that have to be stopped, in our view, immediately, as the occupation of Iraq or the aggressive Israeli policy with regard to the question of Palestine.

No, I would like to talk about such causes the removal of which might be leading us to an **end of fighting** and, eventually, as a next step, to **confidence building**.

Before going into details on point two, I would like to name point three of my criticism of the current strategy on terror:

Point three: The current strategy is cementing the aggressive character and dominance of very reactionary forces in the Western system. The feeling that the “empire has to strike back” mobilises their resources. Even thoughtful, democratically oriented protagonists are becoming more and more helpless.

As a result, we are witnessing dangerous changes of external and internal strategy that might turn out to remain irreversible.

This is, most probably, the most counterproductive result of the strategy of Al Kaida and others. I can't help thinking that they do not estimate this danger realistically.

Having said this, I would like to return to the question of removing obstacles on the road to peace and confidence building:

Let me name few **causes of fundamental character** *which block the road ideologically and mentally*:

1. Obviously, on both sides there exists a civilisatory and ideological trench.

For one or the other reason.

As it is both right, and at the same time, wrong to talk about “Islamic policy”, it is right and wrong to speak about the “West”. On both sides there is differentiation. Iranian policy is very well aware of this phenomenon of differentiation.

When it comes to the question as of how to overcome the current situation of war, one should try to utilize this phenomenon productively: The talks between Warsaw Pact and NATO states about shaping a system of co-existence went successfully because they did not touch the ideological load of their trench, but bridged it by agreeing on an *agenda* for discussing and resolving concrete political issues.

Talking about **agenda for dispute resolution and bridging ideological trenches**, I would like to turn your attention to the **case of European-Islam relations** with regard to Central Asia:

I started my presentation by pointing out that essential questions of European stability are linked to the processes of transformation and state building.

The **basic fear** on the secular sides, both of the ruling secular regimes **and** the European governments, is that involving a strong Islamic side into the process of state building is, eventually, going to end up in an Islamic state.

This fear is elementary. It leads to, what I call, a “**dilemma of distrust**”. It consists of two dimensions: an internal Central Asian, and a European one.

As for the **internal dimension**, the high level of mutual distrust is the result of a complete lack of guarantees on both the secular and the Islamic sides, that after one side has gained power, it could attempt to eliminate an unwanted partner from the political process.

On the one hand, secular leaders fear that if the Islamic party gains power through democratic means, it will start to establish a theocratic state in which there will be no place for the former leaders.

On the other hand, Islamic leaders are concerned not only that under secular rule their organizations may be listed as terrorist organizations and prohibited, but that even the political legitimization of their parties cannot serve as a guarantee that they will continue to exist in a political structure that has not solved the question of co-existence with political Islamic parties.

If it comes to the European dimension, one has to be sensitive to the deep discrepancies that exist between secular and Islamic blueprints of state- and nation-building, democracy, rule of law, human rights, the equality of women in society, education, and many other fields.

Western European members of the OSCE are apprehensive that, by accepting Islamic parties and values to shape the character of state building in Central Asia, the self-understanding of the OSCE as a community of Western values might erode.

Furthermore, the question remains whether European OSCE-states would agree to legitimizing an Islamic party which has gained power by democratic means, as they might be afraid that this would initiate a radical change of the existing constitutional norms. It is also unclear whether, if moderate Islamic parties gain power, they will guarantee the stability of the constitutional order or whether they will be tempted by more radical Islamic forces to act in an undemocratic way.

Thus, **neither side** has so far offered guarantees acceptable to the other one on their “behaviour toward the opponent”. As a result, the process of mutual estrangement and distrust continues. The ***Islamic elite*** wants to be confident that it will indeed have a political, religious and cultural **perspective** based on equal rights in its **own national state as well as in a broader Euro-Asian frame**. The ***secular sides*** want to be sure that the recognition of OSCE principles and commitments by moderate Islamist leaders, like of the PIRT, is more than a tactical manoeuvre.

As you can see, this is a very complex situation where civilisatory, political, ideological conflicts and the quest for power merge with each other.

However, for the sake of conflict prevention has the nut to be cracked. The goal of confidence building is to initiate a process of understanding in order to remove the dangers arising with regard to civilization, to find common grounds in this course of action as well as getting rid of divisions and misunderstandings to the greatest extent possible. In the long-term, efforts should be made to ease tensions *permanently* and create a situation able to withstand strain.

One has to be aware that such a process takes time, perhaps a generation.

However, it has to be started now and a *political* agenda for *negotiating* a way out of the dilemma of distrust has to be drafted.

Such an agenda needs to address three so to say “concentric geographical circles”. First: the broader European – Islamic dimension, second, the OSCE dimension of Europe and its Muslim regions, and, third, the immediate continental Islamic neighbours of the OSCE region.

The probably most productive testbed for forging such a new relationship lies in Central Asia.

European willingness to recognize political Islamic parties or movements as an integral part of the political process in Central Asia would be an important factor.

However, this factor alone cannot create an atmosphere of trust.

In order to overcome the dilemma of distrust, Islamists should be provided with certain guarantees, and Europe itself must get some “re-assurance” from them.

One could think about the following guarantees:

- 1. Political representatives of Islam** should be able of and prepared for becoming partners of the secular government and finding their own productive place and role in the state, **even if they remain opponents to a secular government.**
In return, the secular government would have to guarantee freedom of religion, democracy and the rule of law.
Within this context, it is of fundamental importance that the secular regimes re-define their policy in relation to religion in general and adopt the basic concept of the secular state to the realities of a Muslim majority of population.
- 2. Political representatives of Islam** must be capable of participating in the democratization process.
- 3. Political representatives of Islam** must be capable of restraining the growth of radicalism.

At the same time, political representatives of Islam also need to receive certain guarantees from Europe,

- 1. Guarantees through the OSCE framework** that the official consent of the state authorities to include Islamic parties in the political process will not turn out to be ephemeral.

2. Guarantees that Europe will support the idea of the participation, based on equal rights, of religious representatives in the process of national state-building, including administrative functions alongside secular forces.
3. Guarantees that the European powers will not use double standards in their response to repression, carried out under the guise of combating extremism, but in reality aimed at weakening of Muslim organisations and institutions, including political representatives of Islam.
4. Guarantees that the principle of free elections is universal and includes Islamic representatives along with all other groups.²
5. Guarantees that, if Islamic parties gain power through democratic parliamentary means, Europe will be willing to recognize the legitimacy of the new government.
6. Guarantees that a state with an Islamic government will remain a part of the OSCE if it can ensure basic human rights (taking into account the differing Islamic concept of human rights).³

All these guarantees could be casted into sort of a

“Code of Principles and Conduct of Cooperation and Co-existence”.

Within this framework, the sides could also develop certain rules, which will make their actions predictable

- in the context of a secular regime which co-exists with political representatives of Islam;
- in the case of the division of power between secular and Islamic forces;
- in the case of a regime change.

Dear colleagues,

winding up:

I just have been trying to outline, half in theory and half based on practical experience in Tajikistan, what are the challenges, on one hand, and what could be a practical approach towards initiating the search for a way out of the dilemma of terrorism, on the other hand.

I believe that such an approach coincides with the point of view of your President, which he expressed in his message to the “Euro-Asia Conference of the 21st Century on ‘The Dialogue Between Cultures’” last June in Bihsket. There, he said “the concept of ‘dialogue’ is in need of a new interpretation with regard to politics, and international relations“, and “we must consider the advancement of ‘dialogue’ to be a multidimensional process.”

What is needed **now** is sort of a **decompression** of the highly tens and dangerous situation.

Therefore, an ignition is required the key of which could be turned by European protagonists of the peace movement and farsighted Islamic partners.

² How will the OSCE states react to the growing influence of Islamic political parties and to the fact that they could win a considerable number of seats in parliament? If this happens, will the OSCE states recognize the results of legitimate elections or, because they are apprehensive of the Islamists, will they prefer to close their eyes to violations (as has occurred before) aimed at weakening political Islam and making the secular regime stronger?

³ The question arises as to whether Europe will maintain its relations with a state in which a change of regime (from secular to Islamic) has occurred, thereby preventing the isolation of this state and thus not giving radical groups grounds to become more militant.

The overriding **working formula** for this could be: Co-operation wherever there is common ground, and non-violent co-existence where deep contradictions exist.