

Muslim Lawyers Conference in Strasbourg

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Between the 5th and 8th February 1999 the Islamic Commission of Europe held its first conference to take place in Strasbourg, where its head office is. The Islamic Commission of Europe, a non-profit-making international association was registered in Brussels in 1992 and established to defend and protect the rights of Muslims living in Europe, utilising the skills and expertise of trained lawyers. The purpose of the Strasbourg Conference was to identify and consider the various issues facing Europe's 16 million Muslims, including especially the situations faced by the Bosnian, Kosovan, Macedonian Albanian and Turkish Muslims. Representatives from these Islamic communities attended and provided information on the particular difficulties faced by their communities. There were also present lawyers from France, South Africa, England, Spain and Scotland.

On the opening day of the conference Dr. Hajj Yasin Dutton a lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Edinburgh and author of *The Origins of Islamic Law* (Curzon Press) gave an overview of the Islamic Sources of Law. On the second day of the conference Mirza Abdul Rashid, a barrister from England, presented a global overview of the conditions affecting Muslims today. There followed more specific presentations by Dr Necati Ceylan, President of the Lawyers Association of Turkey with over 1000 members, by Professor Dr Hassan Fendoglu from Dicle University in Turkey, by Dr Abdullah Milcent a French Lawyer, by Dr Hasmat Basar from the University of Istanbul, by Mr Fatmir Jelliqi a lawyer from Kosovo, by Mr Salih Murat a lawyer from Macedonia, by Ms Adisa Zahiragic a judge in Sarajevo, and by Ms Nermina Baljevic a Professor of Islamic Studies in Bosnia. Each of these participants gave an account of the particular difficulties being faced by the Muslims in their countries, ranging from the massacres being perpetrated against the Muslims in Kosovo to the continuing problems faced by the Bosnian Muslims despite the Dayton agreement, and the ongoing attempts to force a secular constitution upon the Muslims of Turkey – which has resulted *inter alia* in a number of cases being brought before the European Court of Human Rights relating to the prohibition against the wearing of hijab in universities and government offices, the prohibition of military personnel to do the prayer, and the banning of Islamic parties.

Shaykh Abdalqadir al-Murabit then delivered a devastating review of the unpublicised genocide which has been perpetrated against the Muslims of Europe during the twentieth century and which continues in Kosovo, Bosnia and Western Thrace today. Figures compiled from documents in the public domain and confirmed in Treaty Protocols reveal over 7 million Muslims killed in Europe this century – a statistic over which a blanket of silence has been placed.

On the last morning of the conference the delegates were taken on a tour of the European Court of Human Rights itself by an official who had worked there for many years. He thoughtfully related his talk about the work of the Court to cases brought by Muslims in the past, especially from Turkey, and confirmed that the Court was committed to upholding NATO policy in such matters. He stated that the Court would never recognise an Islamic party in Turkey, that it considered Turkish universities entitled to ban the hijab, and the Turkish army entitled to prevent its soldiers from worshipping God, in order to maintain its integrity and discipline. He also concluded that the Turkish government was entitled to close down private Islamic madrassahs because, he asserted, these should not be allowed to 'indoctrinate' anyone. So much for Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights! Having at last realised from the questions that were asked that his comments had been deeply insulting, he did have the courtesy to apologise. Nevertheless, the delegates were not left with any illusions as to what kind of justice could be expected in the European Court of Human Rights by Muslims seeking to secure their Article 9 rights, especially those living in the Balkans and Turkey.

In spite of this unexpected finale, the Strasbourg Conference was a great success. As Dr Salih Murat from Macedonia stated, when relating a discussion he had had with his wife about why he wanted to attend the conference: "I told her that I wanted to be a part of history and that this Conference would insh'Allah be a part of history." It was.

• Tareq Ali and Ahmad Thomson •