

2. Revitalizing the Dialogue between Cultures

2.1 A Post-Cartoon Strategy

with comments by the Euro-Med Non-Governmental Platform
and Abdul Aziz Saïd

Background

The Euro-Mediterranean Summit in Barcelona had adopted on 28 November 2005 a Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism. The document includes the following commitment of the Governments of all EU Member States and their Mediterranean partners: “We confirm that we will...reject any attempts to associate terrorism with any nation, culture or religion.”

My participation in the ISESCO Symposium “Dialogue between Cultures and Civilizations: From Dialogue to Alliance” (Tunis, 30 January to 1 February 2006) coincided with the so-called “Cartoon Crisis”, an outbreak of mass protests in Arab countries against a widely perceived lack of respect of Islamic values in Western countries. On the basis of a statement made in Tunis on the new Code of Conduct, I developed – at request of the European Commission – a first outline of a new strategy for re-launching the Dialogue between Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean space. This strategy was presented at a special session of the intergovernmental Euro-Med Committee in Brussels on 22 February 2006, together with a position paper of the Arab Group (reprinted as section 2.3 of this publication). It was a basic document stimulating debates among civil society organizations in the following months. Preliminary conclusions, based on results of this debate and, in particular, the recommendations elaborated by a High Level Group of Experts, established by the

Anna Lindh Foundation and the Arab League (section 3.4) were presented to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the 37 Member States of the EuroMed Partnership and to the Heads of the Foundation's National Networks in November 2006 (section 2.5).

A new Code of Conduct?

If it is necessary to conclude international agreements on the basic principle of the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism – which derives its substance from the non-discrimination values of Human Rights – we have a problem. Since terrorists usually claim to act on behalf of whole nations or regions or religions, there is urgent need for promoting a new and better understanding of culture. It is a matter of fact that we are all born into existing cultural environments. But it is also true that creativity is an essential part of the human condition. Culture is heritage as well as creation.

We need to promote a better understanding of cultural diversity. It is a matter of fact that one aspect of cultural diversity can be found in differences between common cultural characteristics of nations or religions. But it is also true that creative diversity is part of the wealth of each nation and religion. Statements such as “if you know one Arab, you know them all” are stupid but among the core ingredients of stereotypes and racism.

Past generations in the Euro-Mediterranean region have, too often, limited the idea of dialogue between cultures to a dialogue between nations, languages and religions. This way, and against best intentions, it was made possible to misuse culture as a weapon in preparing for a clash of civilisations. If we are committed to de-legitimize terrorism, we have to refrain from the traditional but extremely dangerous pattern of organizing cultural dialogue with individuals invited to “represent” whole cultural entities or religions.

Key arguments

1. Traditional modalities of Dialogue between Cultures, developed over the past Decade, have largely failed because of their focus on what cultures and religions have in common. The present crisis calls for dialogue on differences and diversity, based on the common value of non-discrimination.
2. The lack of mutual knowledge about sensitive issues linked to religions and any other belief is obvious. This gap needs to be filled as a matter of urgency.
3. Too often, dialogue events stressed collective identities (national, ethnic, religious) rather than identities of individuals or social groups. Dialogue Fora composed of “representatives” of religious or ethnic groups are counter-productive and contribute to the clash of civilizations scenario rather than preventing it.
4. There is urgent need for strengthening the human rights based dimension of Dialogue. Rather than seeking values common to all religions and cultures, the core values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights need to be stressed: No discrimination along origin, race, colour, gender, language, religion or any other belief has been agreed upon by the international community 60 years ago. In line with recent UN terminology, all cultures must be considered having equal dignity without, however, allowing this to be used as an argument for limiting the obligations linked to universal human rights instruments.
5. Active tolerance, involving mutual respect, needs to be promoted rather than mere acceptance of diversity. This requires provision of new and better learning resources and interactive educational methods (education understood in the broader sense of organization of learning processes, “interactive” understood as learning through empathy and role-taking).
6. Boycott is never a solution; it is an alarm signal. The present crisis calls for significantly more mutual interest being expressed. Europeans can contribute to calming the situation in expressing interest in the cultural and religious life within Mediterranean Partner countries, and vice versa. Stereotypes existing on both sides (such as: Europeans having lost moral values and ethical standards, Arabs or Muslims being potential supporters of terrorism) can only be overcome through sincere dialogue about diversity between and within countries.

Conclusion for the organization of dialogue events

There should be no more “representative” events. Events should be:

- inter-institutional, with the objective of creating synergies and common platforms of action, as follow-up to the Rabat Commitment on concrete and sustainable steps for dialogue, concluded in June 2005 between ALECSO, ISESCO, OIC, UNESCO, Council of Europe, DCCD, and the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF)¹, or:
- all participants talking in a personal capacity; or:
- workshops or seminars on good practice: or:
- reach out events.

New projects and programmes

The strategy paper was accompanied by a draft action plan which was enriched in the following months by concrete projects and programmes. These include:

- A EuroMed teacher training programme on cultural diversity and religious pluralism (established jointly with the Council of Europe and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization ALECSO).
- The “Dialogue 21 Campaign”, an Internet-based Youth Dialogue collecting comments and proposals from young people between 18 and 25 years, with a mechanism of matching European and Arab, Turkish or Israeli partners for continued exchange of

¹ The Rabat Commitment, 16 June 2005; online www.unesco.org, www.euromedalex.org and other websites; full text and proceedings: Dialogue among Civilizations. International Conference: Fostering Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations through Concrete and Sustainable Initiatives. Rabat, Morocco, 14-16 June 2005. Paris: UNESCO 2007

opinions. The proposals were collected and developed in a Youth Workshop; the best participants were awarded a distinction as “Youth Messengers for Dialogue”, and their proposals were presented to the EuroMed Committee.

- A series of Youth Dialogue workshops: A series of workshops offered training of dialogue skills through simulation games, role-taking and elaboration of proposals for settlement of conflict. Another feature was a series of workshops on non-verbal intercultural exchange and cooperation in arts, music and cooking.
- Training of teamwork among young graduates from all Euro-Med countries (with establishment of Euro-Med Young Researchers projects and groups).
- Cooperation with media and journalists associations: A media campaign with Arab TV and radio stations was started for explaining principles of dialogue to large audiences. A special award was created for young journalists covering the living together of communities with different cultural background, and project grants were offered for “women as promoters of dialogue in the media”.
- A regional programme for the development of children’s and youth literature.

These projects started immediately and found their way into the new three years strategy and programme of the Anna Lindh Foundation for 2007-2009 which was approved by the intergovernmental Euro-Med Committee in September 2006 (www.euromedalex.org).

Comments by the Euro-Mediterranean Non-Governmental Platform

First of all, we do fully agree with your criticizing the former attempts to organise Dialogue between Cultures on the basis of collective identities as if those would be fixed forever. These attempts, based on a dominant idea that cultures are homogeneous, have made it difficult to discuss about internal tensions within cultures, internal needs for debate and historicisation. These attempts have put aside the political dimension of relations between cultures too. They have never confronted the issue of power relations between cultures, and have lead to immobility, in so far as each of the groups involved prefers to remain within its own well-defined borders and to maintain a status quo, instead of crossing the borders.

We fully agree, too, with the argument that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights core values need to be stressed within the Dialogue between Cultures frame. These core values have to be linked with new instruments such as the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity, in order to articulate both dimensions. None of them should be instrumentalised against the other. Out of this exercise may come interesting insights.

We agree, too, with the idea that “representative” events are presently useless, and even more: counterproductive. Multiplying links, connections, mobility of civil actors, journalists, artists, creating common spaces for debate is much more important.

Finally, we agree with the fact that mutual respect is a key for relaunching social links in the Mediterranean area.

Still, in our region we are very far from this mutual respect the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) calls upon. It is not the place for developing at length the political, economic and social realities in the region, and their impact on mutual perceptions. We would just like to underline that the past months – not speaking about the past years – in the region have been stamped by a huge lack of respect. From the migrants’ silence and marginalisation in Europe to the ill-treatment of asylum seekers at the EU borders

(Ceuta and Melilla as part of a trauma) to the most recent images coming from the Jenin prison attack, with half naked men being kept under weapons' control by the Israeli army – not to mention terrible images and information related to the Iraq War, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraïb, etc. Imaginaries are traumatised. Hatred speeches are enhanced by each of these images.

Imaginaries in the North have been traumatised too. The 11th September events, followed especially by the terrorist attacks in Spain, Morocco, Tunisia and Great Britain, have created an atmosphere of fear, of distrust. Racism and xenophobia are increasing in many European countries. The lack of trust is obvious. The “dialogue between cultures” initiatives have first been launched as an answer (better said, a reaction) to the 11th September, and this has produced negative dynamics.

Consequently, one of our first duties in the region should be to disconnect “dialogue between cultures” from reaction to terrorism, and to raise problems as they are.

It means first that we have to make internal debates within each culture visible, and that we have to contribute to developing them. As already said, there is no homogeneous culture. Each of them is a mosaic of trends, habits, representations, memories, languages, ways to practice language, monolingualism or multilingualism, etc. Common trends of radicalisation, hatred and closed identity speeches are being spread all around in the region. They have many common points, beyond their announced “cultural differences”. They look like each other.

Democracy is fragile, not only in the South but in the North as well – many of the European NGOs being part of the Platform could give a more detailed insight in this fragility of Europe. In the southern countries of this region, democrats have been fragilised for years, not to say that they were kept under silence. They have been undergoing attacks from all sides for years and years, because their position was always the wrong one in the past historical struggles for power, during the Cold War, and after. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has opened a frame for these democrats to interact, and to debate about their visions of society. None of the already mentioned radical trends welcome them.

There is not a single and unified vision of what a democratic society is. There is not a single version of what relations between cultures could/should look like. But there is one single way to reject the other, to make singularities to vanish in collective belongings, to censor multiple belongings and open imaginaries.

What we are facing is for sure not a cultural crisis. We are facing an in-depth political crisis which marginalises these democrats or tries to control them and enclose them within well-stereotyped frames of what democracy should be or should not be, which marginalises and threatens freedom of thought, of consciousness, of expression and creation. We are facing an in-depth political crisis where traditional schemes are being attacked/deconstructed through symbolic violence, and this has consequences on social links. We are facing a political crisis where cities find hardly means to make people live together.

Back to the Euro-Med frame, we reiterate our attachment to it, as it represents a unique frame for overcoming such situations, while discussing them. Still, we all know that this frame will be more successful once equality and reciprocity will become central in it. (It is the reason why the expression “Unity in Diversity”, used in a document produced by the ALF, may sound slightly too Eurocentric – as it reminds a lot of the EU device in the European Constitutional Treaty). Core values are equality and reciprocity on all the Mediterranean shores as well as within societies of the region.

Taking account of this, we may draw your attention to the way campaigning in the European media should be conceived. Immigrants who are living in Europe should feel at ease with this campaigning and accept it. Immigrants play a determining role in the perception people have of the Euro-Med region. We would suggest including this aspect into your strategy. Memories of migrants have to be taken account of. Memories of Europe including migrants are central. The immigrants’ contribution to European societies has to be visible and better understood. The minorities’ contribution to societies of the region has to be acknowledged, etc. Reciprocity is at the very core of respect. And responsibilities of States should be underlined there.

There is a need for stressing interdependence and common destiny in the Euro-Med region and for translating it into action. It implies new dynamics, new visions, new proposals, and the ALF may contribute a lot in offering a “scene” for such imaginaries to arise.

This comment was received from Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes, Vice-President of the Euro-Med Non-Governmental Platform on 20 March 2006. This Platform re-groups hundreds of civil society organizations and networks in the Euro-Mediterranean region and organizes the annual Euro-Med Civil Forum.

Comments by Abdul Aziz Said

1. It has traditionally been the case in inter-religious dialogue that majority cultures tend to be more interested in **commonalities and “overcoming” differences**, while minority groups have tended to emphasize the importance of difference, identity boundaries, and the rights to being different. Addressing inherent power inequalities by shifting the research agenda toward emphasizing difference is an important step toward addressing cultural difference at the state and interstate level.

Yet difference has also been a source of fear and mistrust in the absence of a framework that allows for the possibility of moral equivalence and in the context of an absence of security. Moral judgments still calibrate difference along superior/inferior axes, with those related to the self typically accorded with the highest moral stature. These are the differences exploited by political opportunists which can polarize entire communities already isolated from one another and insecure in their understanding of difference.

As Father Dall’Oglio points out, retrieving parallel cultural concepts that help to develop norms of respect for the Other are critical. Cultural concepts, designed for the “in-group”, reveal underlying spiritual norms of unity, selflessness and material transcendence so urgently needed for building respect for others and for their boundaries. In the United States, we can look to cultural norms of “civility” and “good neighborliness” as part of our repertoire of meaning and for guidelines in structuring our attitude and actions to the Other. Only when we fully cultivate respect for cultural difference at the interstate level, will we cease to believe that casting others in our own image is the only way we can achieve salvation, peace, or security.

2. The lack of **mutual knowledge about sensitive issues** linked to religions must be fully addressed.

Religious ideals permeate virtually every aspect of our social order and understanding, as it addresses the most profound existential issues of human life (e.g. freedom and inevitability, fear and faith, security and insecurity, right and wrong, sacred and

profane). Our very notions of peace – how it is achieved, experienced and perpetuated – are derived from our religious predispositions, core assumptions, ideals and highest values.

Sensitive issues in religion are inextricably bound with a larger whole, and must be viewed in the larger context of multiple goal-seeking behaviors of believers.

At the same time, it may be important to examine *when* issues become sensitive in different religious traditions, to identify what other historical, political, economic, or social triggering events or contexts may be strongly influencing the emergence of certain issues or themes over others. These may be responses to conflicts that evoke deep-seated needs for affirmation of identity and a restoration of meaning for those involved. Individuals under pressure may look to religions for idealized courses of actions and other forms of inspiration. Addressing these extra-religious issues may also be as important as understanding their religiously-rooted responses.

3. The process of dialogue itself is as important as the commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes. The traditional emphasis on “**collective identities**” tends to generate loyalty issues, the need to defend or present an idealized form, and fears of demonstrating group vulnerability which prevent the kind of self-reflexivity that effective communication and constructive dialogue requires. The opportunity to hear or recognize the value of others shuts off. We endeavor to describe ‘who we are’ while the other tells us ‘what we do’. We wish to present the highest idealizations of ourselves while the other presents us with our shadow self. We strive to underscore the universality of our values while the other points to the particularity of their application. We project our deepest fears on to the character of others.

Individuals of different cultures, religions and communities in conflict will always feel the weight of group representation while engaged in dialogue with others. What we can do, however, is lighten their burden by addressing the dynamics of conflict behavior and create safe spaces. People under stress react by reducing their beliefs to small, workable subsets in order to fight and protect themselves, assuming a rigidity and defensiveness that closes off effective dialogical encounters. Skilled facilitators can help to identify these shared processes and help participants through these reactions.

4. **Human rights** must always be promoted as a goal of dialogue. Creation and follow-through of ‘actionable’ policies must form an integral part of the dialogue process,

which push participants to think collaboratively on concrete measures designed to build trust and direct resources toward shared goals. Dialogue may make friends, but checklists and achievable goals make allies.

5. **Active tolerance:** Dialogue, as a new paradigm in global relations, is based on knowledge to achieve new knowledge, to see each other with different eyes, in a different light, looking together toward a shared future in a global community made safe for diversity. Active tolerance involves more than peaceful coexistence – it is bringing to the table the best that our civilizations and communities have to offer. In recognizing the contributions of others, we become morally equal partners working toward a shared global community. For example, the West offers much to the Islamic world in terms of institutionalizing democracy, education and development. In exchange, Islam can offer the West its own considerable achievements and insights into community, spirituality and diversity.

Dialogues which become conflict management enterprises are subversive contests to delegitimize the other and reduce them to dehumanized symbols. Dialogue challenges us to deeply investigate our assumptions; active tolerance compels us to live by the principles we proclaim and those we discover through our dialogical encounter. Through this process we stimulate the flourishing of each of our communities.

6. **Common Language:** Cultural diversity and difference are expressions of the richness of creation. As social creatures, however, we tend to respond to stress and conflict by reducing difference to threats and rejecting Others as mere symbols. The West has recognized on the surface the value of diversity, and yet has episodically wrestled with such homogenizing forces as nationalism and other ‘isms’, while strong religious undercurrents actively seek to transcend identity differences through invocation of love and compassion. While acknowledging the commonality of needs, we must accept the plurality of wants as a civic virtue. Linking intra-religious and intra-cultural dialogue with the inter-religious and inter-cultural dimensions remains one of the most pressing issues for the future of the dialogue of civilizations.

Prof. Dr. Abdul Aziz Said is Founder and Director of the Center for Global Peace, and the International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program, American University in Washington, DC. He contributed this comment in his capacity as member of the High Level Group of Experts on overcoming major misconceptions between “the West” and “Islam” (see section 3.4)