

2.2 ALECSO and ISESCO: “The Dialogue with the Other”: Principles and Recommendations

The following document is the result of an Arab expert meeting, convened 4 to 7 January 2006 in Abu Dhabi by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), which is the cultural organization of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), together with ALECSO (the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization) and the United Arab Emirates National Commission for UNESCO (which is the Arab countries coordinator of the Euro-Arab Task Force of National Commissions on “Learning to Live Together”). The following English version of the results was published in the Internet after the meeting; it is reprinted with only minor editing. Western dialogue managers are invited to read not only the more harmonious texts resulting from international dialogue meetings but also authentic texts from within the Arab-Muslim world. The following text includes a number of important elements of a “balanced dialogue”, for example the insistence in both self-criticism and equal footing of dialogue partners. The document advocates a strict separation of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. (Editorial note, TS)

Warranties of the ‘Dialogue with the Other’

Our world is currently witnessing an age of Globalization that has contributed to the affluence of thoughts, goods and services among countries and nations. Globalization mainly tends to uniformity in the world’s different political, economic, social and cultural aspects; it deeply threatens cultural diversity. And now with Globalization reaching the stage of unilateral dominance over the international scene and the struggle to marginalize the great majority of nations and cultures, a large number of countries – including Arab countries – have decided to unite in the face of this dangerous Globalization and to fight its possible threats.

A number of conferences have been held to promote the political, cultural and economic dialogue with the participation of selected Arab cultural personalities who discussed a number of important issues for figuring out the mutual interests between Arabs and other nations.

Among the important issues discussed was the issue of identity, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the dangers of interexchanging the concepts of resistance and terrorism, provocation of clashes between Islam and the West, dividing the world into a rich North and a poor South, in addition to the problems of environment, desertification, unemployment, starvation, illiteracy...etc.

The need for 'Dialogue with the Other' has become more urgent than ever before, which requires an international dialogue in the light of what Globalization dictates about democracy on the political level, liberalism on the economic level, and establishing modern countries upon basis of highly developed technologies as an essential basis for production in a world witnessing many economic and social turns.

However, Arabs and Muslims should start with a dialogue among themselves before they would consider the 'Dialogue with the Other', and both should proceed hand in hand. The 'Dialogue' should be based upon deep belief in cultural diversity, self-knowledge and self-judgment, designing referential frames for a fruitful dialogue with the Other as well as rejecting arbitrariness and any other form of ethnic or religious discrimination.

The 'Dialogue with the Self' should also aim at protecting the cultural diversity in the Arab world within the frame of unity, and it should guarantee the openness for the global culture and reject all forms of radicalism, isolation and arrogance. Besides, it should also guarantee the acceptance of the Other, enhancing the sense of tolerance and respect of the spiritual and cultural heritage of all nations.

Arabs and Muslims are currently at the centre of the international struggle which involves political, military, economic and cultural levels. Arab and Muslim intellectuals cannot stand arm-folded in front of all the dramatic shifts that take place in the Middle East, the most dangerous of which is the project of the Greater Middle East, the Israeli stubbornness towards establishing a Palestinian state, in addition to the major geo-political confrontations which the whole world currently witnesses.

This is why Arab and Muslim intellectuals call for creating a dialogue among themselves and with other nations, and persist in refusing any schemes for marginalizing Arab and

Muslim nations as well as any intentions for keeping them away from making important decisions affecting the future of Arab Muslim nations and cultures.

Through an effective 'Dialogue with the Other', Muslims and Arabs aim at reaching a good stand on the international scene in the age of Globalization, a stand which they want and which is not dictated by others. The Other is not only the West; the Other is all the African, Latin American and Asian nations with whom Arabs and Muslims share a number of political, social, human and cultural aspects.

The 'Dialogue' aimed at by the Arabs and Muslims at this critical stage in the history of humanity is a dialogue based upon the freedom of choice and the respect of the Other who is culturally, ethnically and religiously different. One of the main factors of success of this 'Dialogue with the Other' is that Arab and Muslim intellectuals should give up their complex of guilt and their feeling of always being accused and always being in the defensive.

We have to understand that this 'Dialogue' is constrained by a number of complicated international factors through which many external schemes are dictated upon nations within the frame of what is called the 'war of thoughts'. Besides, it is also constrained by the American desire to reshape the other nations according to their own criteria.

All this brings about the urgent need for a wise dialogue between the different nations and for creating the basis for new international relations.

Principles of a balanced 'Dialogue with the Other'

One of the essential objectives of a fruitful Dialogue with the Self or with the Other is working for the establishment of a basis for mutual understanding between peoples who have different beliefs and different concepts of life. All this requires abiding by the rules of a rational dialogue with the Other which are:

1. Self-Knowledge and self-criticism and re-assessment of the current economic, social, cultural and political problems they are facing and which lead to their weakness and fragmentation at regional level as well as ineffectiveness at the international level.

Arabs and Muslims cannot present themselves through a 'Dialogue' with a perfect image without any defects.

There should be a constructive criticism of the current state of the Arab-Muslim culture with reference to the Arab-Muslim heritage which should be researched for bright examples of rationalism, openness and tolerance that could be brought into the 'Dialogue' in question.

It is obvious that Western Europe was the first to contribute cultural creation which still affects the modern world. It was the creator of the first technological and industrial revolutions, further developed in the Far East during the 20th century. Thus, a deep critical knowledge and a profound understanding of the Western cultural contributions should be the best gate towards any fruitful dialogue with the European and the American West.

One of the main features of this 'Dialogue with the Other' is that it evolves in the frame of a modern global civilization with human dimensions that the Arab-Muslims have contributed to earlier civilizations. This is why Arab-Muslim intellectuals should go back to their heritage and rediscover it with a critical eye and deep understanding, in order to make use of all its great achievements.

They should also go back to the right spots in the history of Arab-Muslim achievements, in order to realize that we are an integral part of the modern civilizations of all nations. Arab-Muslim intellectuals are invited to a dialogue with the positive and rational aspects of their cultures, as an essential step towards a constructive dialogue with the current global cultures.

2. Arab-Muslim intellectuals should also have a similar critical reading and understanding of the cultures of the Other, and they should search for their historical background. Dialogue requires profound understanding of the present, the past and the heritage of the Other, in addition to the institutional frames of reference of former dialogues between Arab-Muslims and the West, and to conclusions and recommendations issued by international and regional cultural and political organizations.
3. Arab-Muslim intellectuals should give up their feelings of inferiority, their guilt complex and their attitude of always being in the defensive. Balanced dialogue creates a solid ground of understanding and a basis for fruitful cooperation with the Other for

establishing a new form of Globalization that tends to be more humane and tends to further respecting cultural particularities as well as cultural diversities. This balanced 'Dialogue' also requires accepting differences in points of view, respect of human freedom and rejecting any form of imposing principles and values.

4. Employing scientific methods in the Dialogue and searching for objectivity as a means of understanding the Other are core elements for fruitful cooperation and for building together a better human future, with better methods for education, scientific and academic research as well as promoting cultural exchange.

Levels of the 'Dialogue'

One of the main factors for achieving a fruitful dialogue is including all the political, economic and cultural aspects, as well as all the Arab personalities involved in 'Dialogue'. Dialogue should take place at the following levels:

1. Among political leaders and decision-makers, representatives of political parties and political organizations.
2. Among religious personalities and researchers in the field of religion.
3. Among intellectuals, thinkers, authors, artists and representatives of civil society organizations.

Intercultural dialogue and inter-religious dialogues should be kept separate so that religion would not be used as a means for pursuing political interests.

Trustworthy specialized working groups should be charged with conducting the 'Dialogue' with the different nations, as well as with selecting Arab intellectuals who have the experience and the ability to conduct interactive cultural dialogues with intellectuals from other countries, for furthering the understanding between the two sides.

Media and cultural institutions are invited to publish the principles of the 'Dialogue' and for further explaining them, in order to creating awareness of its importance at national level.

Objectives of the 'Arab-Muslim Dialogue with the Other' in the Age of Globalization

The main objectives of the Arab-Muslim Dialogue with the Other in the age of Globalization include the following:

1. Establishing fundamentals of peace, security and justice in the world, and work for achieving prosperity for all nations as well as policies ensuring economic growth, in order to face all forms of radicalism, discrimination and terrorism.
2. Opposing all forms of radicalism and searching for shared human aspects with the Other.
3. Creating an atmosphere of stability and welfare for all mankind, rejecting fatal struggles and all kinds of violence as well as respecting the local cultures and the right to protect their ownership and heritage.
4. Establishing a solid basis for renewing the 'Dialogue' as well as enhancing a culture of openness and tolerance. Establishing international organizations in the service of humanity, and improving the existing organizations with a view to solving any current struggles through diplomacy, according to UN principles and International Law.
5. Implementing new forms of fruitful cooperation between the forces of the new international system, according to the principles applied by the 'Dialogue' of cultures and civilizations, and rejecting all forms of occupation and despotism against weak nations. Rejecting illegal political and military interference (e.g. Iraq), Israeli occupation and the atrocious Israeli actions against Palestinians.
6. Involving Arab-Muslims in establishing an international alliance for creating a multilateral world, in order to overcome unilateral dominance.
7. Establishing Arab-Muslim scientific institutions with the experience of the selected scientific personalities in the Arab world, in order to enhance a fruitful 'Dialogue with the Other'.

8. Launching a permanent media campaign in cooperation with distinguished media personalities, in order to further explain the benefits of the 'Dialogue'.
9. Emphasizing the real bright image of Arabs and Islam and their civilizations and disapproving all kinds of radicalism that have been generally associated with Arabs and Muslims.

Dialogue Methodology and Ethics

To ensure the success of the 'Dialogue', the topics chosen should have the dimension of mutuality and should avoid tackling sensitive issues that would offend the feelings of one of the sides of the 'Dialogue'.

As Arab-Muslims respect the culture and the beliefs of the Other, they also expect that the Other should reciprocate this respect. This requires that both sides of the 'Dialogue' stick to the following ethical guidelines:

1. Respecting cultural diversity and accepting the fact that human diversity is the key to human welfare.
2. Avoid wrong ideas; working on better mutual understanding and focusing on working together.
3. Dialogue should be based on rationalism, scientific methods and self-criticism.
4. Good understanding of the 'Dialogue' conditions and trying to reach fruitful conclusions and recommendations and conditions for their implementation.
5. Searching for bright sides of cultures and focusing on them. Depending on self-criticism to avoid any inherited mistakes of arrogance and pride.
6. Ensuring that the 'Dialogue' should be rich and free from all forms of radicalism or fanaticism. Striving for impartiality and equality when implementing recommen-

dations, respecting human rights, and avoid using the ‘Dialogue’ as a means of pursuing personal interests.

7. Reconsidering all the common concepts of progress and backwardness, without associating them with certain nations and religions; overcoming stereotypes in this regard.
8. No civilization can impose permanent values of cultural progress and backwardness on other civilizations; Western progress should not be the only criterion for progress of all other nations.

Recommendations

Arab-Muslims proved to be capable of having mutual dialogues with other nations throughout different historical phases, especially in the old Islamic civilization. Arabs and Muslims are more than willing to enhance such ‘Dialogue’ at our times, and are committed to success of this ‘Dialogue’. Recommendations of further conferences should be geared towards the implementation and to the success of the new ‘Dialogue’.

Current conditions in the age of Globalization are becoming more complicated. This requires a departure from old myths with reference to the great Arab and Islamic cultural achievements of the old Islamic civilizations, and identifying the reasons and factors behind the deterioration of this civilization.

Modern culture is diverse and complicated and should not be considered separately; the cultural Dialogue should include all the social, political and economic aspects, and involve cooperation with competent personalities from these spheres, and with representatives of media and civil society organizations. This should broaden the horizons of the ‘Dialogue’ and enrich its topics, in order to reach at important conclusions aiming at the welfare of the nations and targeted at improving the present and the future of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Arab intellectuals are well-experienced and fully equipped for conducting such dialogues between cultures, and for addressing the different cultures in their own languages. These intellectuals and cultural and scientific personalities can add more human dimensions

to the 'Dialogue' in the age of Globalization and can also launch initiatives which can further enhance the 'Dialogue' on the basis of peace and respect of others' interests.

In order to ensure the fruitfulness of the 'Dialogue', we recommend the following:

1. Issuing Arab and Islamic initiatives with human dimensions to limit the threats of Globalization and American dictatorship.
2. Referring to Arab and Islamic values, in order to distinguish between resistance and terrorism, and to limit any external interference in domestic affairs.
3. Arab and Muslim cooperation for reforming the UN and its institutions, in order to enhance their role in peace-keeping on the basis of justice, to protect the independence of small countries, and to prohibit military interference from major powers.
4. Participating in the elaboration of new legislation against ethnic or religious discrimination.
5. Setting rational limits to the concept of an international trade that has severely harmed the developing and poor countries.
6. Effective participation in the cultural movement against Globalization.
7. Encouraging Arab endeavours towards establishing a Globalization with human dimensions, and the cooperation with independent intellectuals and democrats for stopping the arms race which threatens to provoke more armed conflicts especially in the Middle East.
8. Creating a new generation of youth movements, based on deep belief in constructive dialogue between different nations, and launching a campaign for the translation and publication of books that contribute to raising the awareness among Arab-Muslim youth of the importance of the 'Dialogue'.
9. Commending the joint initiative of the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and of the Islamic Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization for holding this meeting; and calling for follow-up through regular meetings of Arab intellectuals in order to work out a joint Arab Islamic perspective for more dialogues with intellectuals from other countries; the issue of 'Dialogue' should be placed as a permanent topic on their agenda.