

### **3.4 Anna Lindh Foundation and the Arab League: Overcoming Major Misconceptions in Intercultural and Inter-Religious Dialogue**

#### **Recommendations by a High-Level Experts Group**

*Upon a proposal by the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (March 2006), an international group of experts was convened to assist in the development of a new strategy for the revitalization of the intercultural dialogue. At request of the Inter-governmental EuroMed Committee (April 2006), the subject was focused on “major misconceptions”. The experts acted in their personal capacity. Their meeting in Cairo on 15 and 16 October 2006 was preceded by exchange of comments and proposals among the experts on the basis of strategy documents submitted to them, in particular the papers “What went wrong..” and “Strategy for Re-launching the Dialogue” (sections 1 and 2.1), together with statements by Paolo Dall’Oglio (section 6.1).*

1. The dichotomy **“Islam and the West”** is among the major misconceptions. It has roots in the historical European construct of “Orient” vs. “Occident”. It needs to be replaced, in relation to the context, either by geographical terms or by references to inter-religious or intercultural relations or to political groupings. Since, however, the dichotomy is widely used, it misguides both perceptions and actions. Remedial action should include appreciation of Islam as part of Europe’s history and identity, as well as of religious and cultural diversity within the Arab World; highlighting the principles of equality, partnership, good neighbourhood and living together in cultural and religious pluralism agreed upon in the Barcelona Declaration.
2. The misconception of a **“clash of civilisations”** cannot be overcome by denying or merely replacing negative with positive terms such as “alliance” or “dialogue between cultures”. The underlying concept of cultural determinism itself needs to be addressed

by better understanding of cultures and civilisations as both heritage and space of freedom for citizens enjoying their civic, cultural, economic and political rights agreed upon by the international community.

Since, however, the misconception of a “clash” seems to have taken root and can, therefore, easily be misused for fuelling conflicts, warnings against societies falling back into culturalism or even religious wars must be taken seriously. Cultural and religious factors of conflicts need to be identified.

3. New measures of **prevention and early intervention** are necessary in order to avoid that critical situations (such as the cartoon issue) get out of control. Critical moments should be addressed by appropriate intergovernmental bodies at the earliest stage (e.g. EuroMed Committee/Senior Officials). Civil society actors are also called upon raising their voice in public against expression of conflicts in cultural or religious terms and in favour of respect of diversity and pluralism.
4. **Dialogue must be open for all groups in society.** Creating space of dialogue for so-called fundamentalists is a challenge that should no longer be neglected, without, however, imposing qualifications such as “moderate” or “fundamentalist” from outside.
5. The term “**dialogue between cultures**” itself is subject of profound misconceptions such as: an instrument for imposing opinions or values on others; participants “representing” cultures or civilisations; series of monologue statements. It is essential to conceive dialogues as open-ended events, based on principles of reciprocity and giving room to the expression of multiple, overlapping and dynamic cultural identities of participants (in line with the Universal Declaration and the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity).
6. **Intercultural or inter-religious dialogue** can contribute to a possible settlement of conflicts to the extent that it fully takes into account the historical, political and economic context and that it clarifies misuse of cultural and religious differences for fuelling conflicts. Above all, such dialogue should be conceived **as a learning opportunity** for filling gaps in mutual knowledge and interest and preparing ground for mutual respect and acceptance.
7. The distinction between “**common values**” and “**cultural or religious differences**” is a misconception to the extent that it insinuates an artificial dichotomy. As much as it is essential for a meaningful dialogue to include both dimensions, it is impor-

tant to take into account the diversity of options for putting universally shared values into practice, as well as the social and cultural reality representing many ways of similarities between individuals and groups perceived as “different”.

8. “Ensuring respect of cultural and religious pluralism”, one of the key objectives of the Barcelona Declaration, is compromised by a “**clash of ignorance**”. Providing knowledge about all major cultures and religions existing in the Euro-Mediterranean region to all citizens is an **educational challenge** calling for action by both Governments and civil society. Such knowledge should be made available through the regular school curriculum, in addition to specific religious instruction which usually, and by its very nature, focuses on one religion. The **municipality** should be the space of learning to live together in diversity. Examples of good practice in school and out-of-school education should be collected; innovative projects such as festivals of sacred music or guided visits of places of worship are further encouraged.
  
9. Since **the media** are the most important factor outside family and school for shaping mentalities, respect of cultural and religious diversity should be subject of major efforts to reach out to citizens through the media. Such efforts should include further development of a common **language and terminology facilitating understanding of cultural and religious diversity** beyond stereotypes or self-referential in-group communication.  
Good practices and new ideas need to be further developed with media associations, professional organisations and research institutes. This includes codes of information ethics, codes of conduct, specific media awards, media exchange programmes, incentives for movies featuring living together, and a multilingual dictionary of culture-sensitive vocabulary. Good practice established in recent decades for gender relations (such as guidelines for non-sexist language) should be applied to intercultural relations.
  
10. **Intercultural exchange and training programmes**, as a cornerstone of all efforts aiming at overcoming misconceptions and stereotypes, need to be significantly increased. Priority should be given to modalities which have the most significant effect on mentalities and confidence-building, such as encounters with multi-faith initiatives, workshops aiming at sustainable results, training courses, combination of scholarships with exchange programmes, or cultural youth festivals.

11. Many of these conclusions build on recommendations made by the High-Level Group of Experts, convened by the former President of the European Commission Romano Prodi in 2003, without, however, exhausting them. A **new reading of the Report delivered by the “Prodi Groupe des Sages”** in December 2003 is, therefore, recommended.<sup>1</sup>

### **Members of the High Level Group**

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1 “Dialogue Between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area”. Report by the High-Level Advisory Group established at the initiative of the President of the European Commission. Brussels, October 2003 (“Prodi Groupe des Sages”). Online on many websites such as [www.euromedalex.org](http://www.euromedalex.org) or [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu).

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