

The High-Level Advisory Group: a Living Illustration of Dialogue Between Peoples and Cultures in the (Intercultural) Euro-Mediterranean Area

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If intercultural dialogue has in the past been desirable, it is now more than ever a necessity; not in order to combat the «clash of civilisations» proclaimed and so effectively seized upon by Ben Laden after 11th September 2001, but rather to overcome abounding ignorance, due to the fact that there actually exists a devastating clash of ignorance on both sides. In the light of obsessions and horrors of the present time, intercultural dialogue is the only way to build the bridges of tomorrow, and to achieve a common future within the area that we share.

Heartened by this belief, I responded enthusiastically to Mr. Romano Prodi's invitation to become the co-president of the High-Level Advisory Group that he set up in December 2002 to consider the «dialogue of peoples and cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean area». Over and above the tribute that the president of the European Commission has paid to Arab women in general, with regard to myself as a Moroccan woman, the Mediterranean citizen that I aspire to become detects in this a prelude to the principle of equality, something that is frequently invoked by all yet in practice little applied everywhere. This principle of equality is a matter of great essence in the Mediterranean region, though one that to a large extent lacks progress, despite certain acknowledged breakthroughs such as

those achieved in my country. Therefore I am deeply grateful for Mr. Romano Prodi's invitation. Nonetheless, it is in my own name that I wish to express my thoughts here, and to give an account of an initiative that certainly forms a response in all aspects to the current situation, but which also seeks to re-establish human issues as the focal point of the Euro-Mediterranean debate, by returning to intercultural dialogue the status it deserves in our region.

The High-Level Advisory Group was managed within an open environment, and no subject was off limits. This was possibly due to the variety in all aspects such as backgrounds, defining experiences, areas of expertise, and beliefs and doubts that the members of the group accumulated between them, which highly enriched our debates, and I must say, even the bolstered egos of intellectuals benefited from the meetings. With such diverse experience brought to our group, we had an intercultural dialogue before we even started the dialogue. The report was published on 24th November, after being forwarded to President R. Prodi. And I would like to draw attention to the thought processes, as well as to certain key concepts and some of the results, in an attempt to answer three specific questions: Why do we need intercultural dialogue in the Mediterranean and why now? What are the aims of the group, and how will we undertake these aims?

1. There are several reasons for why we are setting up this dialogue now, but in particular the many problems of the region have accumulated in favour of embarking upon such an exercise at this point in time. I am going to men-

tion a few of these problems, some of which are inherent to culture and its evolution, and others which correspond to global and Euro-Mediterranean contexts.

- Nowadays, cultures are no longer those almost invisible experiences, but rather areas exposed to substantial erosion and change; sensitive areas, in which ideology can exploit disarray. In parallel to the tendency induced by the media toward cultural standardisation, mainly in consumption patterns and youth culture, a very strong desire for differentiation is expressed. The return of culture and religion is taking place against a backdrop of violence and social fragmentation... This is also topical. The historical situations in the North and South of the region are admittedly dissimilar, but they all involve staggering amounts of change and many questions that are asked from all sides. There is, therefore, a real need for intercultural dialogue. First of all, a dialogue with ourselves, concerning the extent to which «interculturality» or even «transculturality» is a part of all of us. The next step consists of dialogue, both within an enlarged Europe, which finds itself enriched by new languages, new cultural heritage and new religions, such as the Orthodox faith and Islam and further ones in the future, and within the Southern area of the region, victim of multiple transitions, painful adjustments, uncertainties and risks. Is not one of the virtues of dialogue its ability to maintain and secure the pluralism and cultural diversity of different places?

- In the face of the difficulties that face a marginalised culture, the questions that is on everyone's minds should be asked directly: What place does culture have in an age in which nations' ideals have been reduced to competitiveness and market shares? What place does culture have in an age in which the globalisation of risks and the privatisation of violence have forced both personal and collective security to be absolute priority, whilst at the same time making its safeguarding a highly complicated matter? What place does cultural diversity have in an age of standardisation and of political and cultural correctness? What, then, is the place that corresponds to a genuine dialogue between civilisations and peoples, when culture and religion are exploited to challenge the established order, on both a domestic and an international scale?

All these questions are being asked everywhere, and they rebound even more acutely in the Mediterranean region. This basin has always been a place of memories, and the cradle and crossroads of civilisations. But such is the degree to which violence, both real and symbolic, has become part of its make-up, that it has been concerted into a universal line of fracture. Aside from the spiritual advantages that it offers us all, the Mediterranean region of today is experiencing great torment. Unified and pluralist at the same time, its very diversity is the source of both its wealth and its suffering.

The shock waves from the Iranian revolution, the upheaval caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of internal destabilising factors, the first two Gulf wars, the conflicts in the Balkans, the rise of the many extremists, negative perceptions interlaced with xenophobia, and the ever-growing prosperity gap. There are so many phenomena and implications that they bring, which have already driven the two shores of the Mediterranean further apart, leaving them often with only menace as the common element. And it is thus that today, with aftermath of 11th September, the post-war situation in Afghanistan,

the current war in Iraq, and the infernal cycle of violence whirled up by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the result of a blend of Islamism and terrorism, the widely heralded split is indeed in peril of becoming a reality.

Dialogue is also necessary in order to humanise the globalisation, which as a concept is affecting the entire world, but which has only become a solid reality in a small fraction of it. Globalisation and the rise of regional blocks lead to the integration of those who have and those who know, and thus to the marginalisation or even exclusion of those who neither have nor know, both within and between nations. The extent of the twin phenomena of poverty and illiteracy in the region has been well studied, as has the degree to which these conditions affect women, who occupy the positions of the poorest of the poor and the most ignorant of the ignorant. The knowledge gap in the information-based society of the twenty-first century perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty, whilst exacerbating the continuously widening prosperity gap. The impact of liberalisation contributes to the further debilitation of a social fabric that has already been placed under severe strain by structural changes, making young people and the most vulnerable groups of society easy prey for extremists on all sides. It is indeed a fact that a minimum level of material comfort is required for a dignified existence, and we are all aware of the degree to which that virtue is regarded as a priority in our region.

There is a genuine need for new paradigms for the comprehension of changing situations, as well as for a new processes of reflection, new instruments and consolidated expertise in the cultural arena, as is the case when regarding economies or politics, in order to liberate culture from elitism and from the restrictions of cultural heritage, which can often become obsessed with the past and overly cautious regarding the future. These ideals show the extent of the ambition of the group's vision, for they look ahead into the next half-century, and demonstrate both the realism and high demand of this ambition in reference to implementation. We regard culture as an egalitarian starting point.

2. What shall we do?

The general principles on which our activities are to be based have been identified, and consist of mutual respect, freedom of conscience, equality, solidarity and the precedence of knowledge over impression. The operational principles have also been identified, as equity, appropriateness, cooperation and cross-fertilisation. The report encompasses many proposals, focussing on humans and concerned with all the relevant agents, such as states, local authorities, NGOs and civil societies. At the end of the report an approach based on space and time summarises and identifies three categories of interdependent areas:

- Education constitutes the backbone of intercultural dialogue. A genuine pedagogy of diversity must be promoted. This concerns us all, and especially young people, but is also particularly aimed at women, with a view to an improved understanding of our respective pasts so that we are better equipped to live out a common future. Important objectives are the teaching of Mediterranean languages, comparative religious education, and the remoulding of human sciences, in order for shared knowledge to also be developed, as well as the providing of training for teachers, and giving support to translation and publication, among other activities. We also aim to promote the increase of Euro-Mediterranean study centres, the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Academy and of a «Braudel-Ibn Khaldoun» universities network, to link up with the Jean Monnet network. These goals constitute a combination of short-term initiatives and longer-term programmes.
- The objective of the second set of proposals is to promote the actual practice of intercultural dialogue on a day-to-day basis, particularly through movement, various forms of exchange and improved practice. As soon as human movement appears on the agenda, it is clear that the migration problem and the restrictive policies that are prevalent in this respect are going to be an issue. It must be remembered that migration is a felicitous phenome-

non, with great potential for cultural cross-fertilisation between peoples, and which, far from dying out, is on the increase, currently involving 135 million people per year. Nevertheless, the subject of migration still seems to attract risks and cultivate fear. This fear can lend substance to the Mediterranean's most extreme visions, particularly when the prosperity gap makes Europe a real magnet that no Schengen agreement would be able to protect. Over and above the many problems that established immigrant communities pose in relation to integration, it is imperative that these migratory flows, which are a real focal point for present grievances, be better managed, in the interests and for the prosperity of the aging population of the north, and the latent danger of underdevelopment that threatens the south. Providing, of course, that the south is not abandoned by all its highly-specialist citizens.

- With regard to the media, a key instrument for the promotion of the principle of reciprocal knowledge and equality for all people, the proposals made encompass the broadcasting and production of specific programmes, and the training of journalists on the issue of diversity. Given its importance, the media has a crucial role to play where an education in diversity is concerned. In completing this role, it is my hope that they will avoid stereotypes and simplistic perceptions, and that they will prioritise knowledge over impressions. We thought that an independent observatory would be useful in this respect.

A task force or watchdog will be on the lookout for suggestions and details of experiences and success stories that it might be possible to adapt. The dialogue will be permanent and on-going, and will, I hope, be enriched not only by the talent of «Euro-Mediterranean peo-

ple», but also by that of everyone who cherishes dialogue and peace.

3. How will we undertake these aims? By doing, undertaking, inspiring, supporting, involving others, and raising awareness of responsibilities, amongst many other activities.

In order to avoid that this dialogue become a simple compensatory discourse that would only replace its predecessor, intercultural dialogue must be backed up by a vision that includes specific actions, as well as by an efficient institution. Evidently, the level of disillusionment, which is widely felt in relation to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, is in direct proportion to the high hopes that this institution had raised. The human aspect (the third basket) is perhaps the most sensitive and certainly the least substantial, with culture as the least touched area of work.

It seems to me that the Mediterranean cannot go much longer without an authentic and permanent Euro-Mediterranean institution, with a statute of equality for partners from the south and the east of the region, and which is financially secure and with its feet firmly on the ground, or rather in the deep blue sea, far from Brussels, which is already heavily overloaded in its role as the base of the EU, NATO and other organisations. This would be for symbolic value, of course, so that we are not restricted to a mere walk-on role in our own history; but it would also function for the purpose of efficiency and would fill a gaping hole in Mediterranean policies. In case anyone needs to be reminded, the lack of democracy for which the nations of the south are so heavily criticised is still the Mediterranean's primary relational characteristic. The neighbourhood policy we advocate must follow suit and equip itself with improved means of releasing energy and promoting synergy.

For the time being, the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, the creation of

which was approved in Valencia and confirmed in Heraklion, will be our common and permanent institution. Of course, the task of finally approving the decision falls to the politicians, and I hope to see this happen in Naples in December. Nevertheless, our group has identified the conditions that must be met to ensure its success. In order to fulfil its objectives and to meet the requirements, the institution must be granted the autonomy necessary for it to enjoy total financial and conceptual independence, so as to be able to assist, coordinate, stimulate, encourage, clarify, and so forth, as a real «look-out post» for intercultural dialogue.

Clearly, there must be no giving way to otherworldliness or naïvety, or thinking that intercultural dialogue will erase all tensions and imperfections. By definition, culture is a place where identities, sometimes bruised identities, reassert themselves, often in conditions of adversity and violence. At the same time, however, it is the only arena that can provide real weapons for the purpose of anticipating, defusing, averting and resolving conflicts, something where certain powers are paying a high price for their forgetfulness. Intercultural dialogue should therefore be neither a panacea nor an end in its own right, but rather a *modus operandi* for defusing aggressiveness, and for progress toward a common future in a shared area. Its vocation is to ensure that social interaction prevails over conflict, and cooperation over confrontation. Since such contradictions are inherent to life itself, and sometimes the worst fights emerge from the own family, a genuine culture of dialogue has to be developed and promoted, and further ensure that it remains viable.

Perhaps, by way of a conclusion, we could consider this reflection from Léopold Sedar Senghor, the poet of cross-cultural communication (he had a good head start on us): «Live your individuality to the full, to find the dawn of universality therein».