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The Quest for Intercultural Dialogue in the Euro-Med Region: Opportunities and Challenges^(**)

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From a geopolitics prism, the Mediterranean basin has been historically regarded as one of the most politically and strategically important regions located at the heart of the world. This important region is equally regarded problematic for encompassing two greatly diverse worlds in terms of politics, economics, and cultures that are in the same time separated by the Mediterranean Sea. Tackling issues of cultural diversity, compared to political and economic relations, has not been included in the political agendas of the Mediterranean countries, in specific those to the North, nor vigorously appeared in debate among Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) until the last decade. The September 11 attacks and the resulting war on terrorism reinforced the so-called "*Clash of Civilizations*", which became better perceived as "*Clash of Religions*". These attacks and their aftermath, represented in the United States led war on terrorism, have produced depressing repercussions on relations, in general, and on intercultural dialogue, in particular, between the two shores of the Mediterranean. One can therefore easily conclude that an effective intercultural dialogue is important to better manage diversity and pave the road for a stable Mediterranean. According to this conception, intercultural dialogue has actually a security enhancing role and is an inseparable component of regional integration. By working as a Confidence Building Measure (CBM), an effective intercultural dialogue serves the security and stability of the Mediterranean region and, if successful, would have a spillover effect on other aspects of cooperation in the framework of the EMP.

The present commentary therefore attempts to shed light on the existing opportunities and challenges that could enable and hinder the two sides of the Mediterranean to deal with cultural issues effectively.

Existing Opportunities

1. ***The multilateralism that the EU represent in its dialogue with the southern Arab-Muslim countries:*** Unlike the unilateralism that has mostly characterized US hegemonic rapprochement of the southern Mediterranean region, specially under the George W. Bush Administration in the aftermath of September 11, the EU represents a somewhat "moral leadership" in the region aided by its inherent character as a multilateral actor. Although this is indeed an opportunity for the EU that increases its ability to act, it should not be overestimated. This is because the crucial political and strategic role that the United States plays in the southern Mediterranean, better to be referred to in this place as the MENA region, gives the United States a greater clout in the region and renders its status quasi invulnerable to Europe as a competitor.

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2. ***Ills to handle identified and mechanisms to heal them established:*** A major achievement of the EMP experience in coping with cultural challenges is that ills to handle are clearly identified. Enough to mention that there is a consensus in the EMP countries that diversity is inherent in all societies, which requires diversity **management** tools that are based on human dignity, equality and non-discrimination. In addition, there is a clear perception on both sides of the Mediterranean of the main issues to tackle for a successful intercultural dialogue. These common issues are increasingly brought into focus and discussion in European-Arab forums, including diversity management mechanisms, violations of minority rights, gender equity, and empowering civil society. Undeniably, the variety of established programs, forums and institutions to tackle these ills is a good asset and an existing opportunity that should be further developed and empowered in order to become effective multilateral forums not only for dialogue but also for action.

Challenges to Tackle

1. ***The heated cultural and religious antagonism as the dominant characteristic setting the stage for the international system in the aftermath of September 11***

The US led war on terrorism and its implications of implicit connotation of the West being in confrontation with Islam influenced intercultural dialogue between the EU and south Mediterranean Muslim Arab countries, even so the EU has adopted an approach founded on the notion of dialogue among cultures and sought a multilateral action.

Indeed, the upsurge in Islamic fundamentalism materialized in terrorist Islamic organizations, especially in the aftermath of September 11, has contributed to slowing down the pace of intercultural dialogue between the two shores of the Mediterranean. It became further unavoidable to all actors in the Mediterranean to take into account the growing hegemonic presence and actions of the United States in the region, backing down EU actions and working to marginalize intercultural dialogue in the EMP itself. Added to this is that despite of the apparent civilizational approach adopted by the EU, the latter has inevitably embraced ample restrictions on the mobility of and exchange programs for groups and individuals (in particular of students, scholars, researchers, artists, and journalists) in the Mediterranean region. This has been noticeably manifested in the regulations stipulated by the EU under the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ), which was introduced into the EU Treaty framework by the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. It incorporates migration law, family reunion law, asylum law, police cooperation, and cooperation in criminal law. Particularly, the AFSJ took on measures to organize aspects of immigration and borders control in addition to the development of security and anti-terrorism procedures, which are of major tension in its social and cultural relations with its Arab partners. Noting the sizable Arab Muslim community in the European continent and the initiated social and cultural venues of cooperation between the EU and these Arab countries, the adopted measures to control immigration and restrict mobility of peoples from the south into the EU were perceived as serious barriers to an effective intercultural dialogue. Consequently, these measures have contributed to widening instead of bridging the gap between the two shores of the Mediterranean. This is because the EU appears to be torn between two contradicting "measures" that serve its security; the first is intercultural dialogue as a confidence building measure and hence a security measure, while the second is stipulating and putting into effect a wide range of anti-terrorism regulations that unavoidably work against an effective intercultural dialogue and greatly diminish the EU credibility in that dialogue.

2. ***The absence of a common strategic language and of a common language to handle cultural differences.*** Although, there is a consensus in the region on what could be referred to as "universal values" as well as a clear identification of the ills to handle in an intercultural dialogue, still there is a divergence in European and Arab perceptions on how to approach cultural differences in a common language. This challenge is further aggravated by the fact that there is no consensus among the two sides of the Mediterranean on the essence of basic fundamental concepts, such as "security considerations" or "threats" to the region. Added to the complexity of this challenge the fact that achieving this common strategic language on security considerations is highly challenging. This is because the main sources of security concern in the north are majorly different from those

in the south. While in the north the EU is preoccupied with rising extremism, chaos and instability emanating from the south and the potential of these elements to breed security risks, the Arabs focus on the enduring Israeli occupation of Arab lands; the political agenda of Iran – rather than its attempts to develop nuclear weapons; repercussions of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and many other security concerns that emanate mainly from inside the region.

3. Apart from geographical fitness, ***the exclusion of some Arab states from the EMP frame, while including Israel, is deeply criticized in the South and regarded as a Western attempt to divide the Arab world.***
4. ***The colonial history has continuously fueled an atmosphere of mistrust, especially in moments of cultural confrontation between Europe and the Muslim world.*** Generally, this colonial legacy has been considered one of the major factors explaining mounting cultural and civilizational antagonism between Europe and the Muslim world. This element continues to fuel suspicion and mistrust of the Europeans initiatives to disseminate its values, norms, structures, and institutions to the southern partners.
5. Related to the preceding point is that, in terms of international political economy, ***the North-South prism through which the Euro-Med relation has usually been perceived undermines an effective intercultural dialogue.*** The divergence in economic systems as well as levels of development contributes to further fueling suspicions of south Mediterranean countries of the intentions and credibility of that hegemonic power to the north.
6. ***The under-funding*** - as an indicator of EU ranking of priorities in its relations with the southern Mediterranean - of activities listed under the third social and cultural basket of the EMP compared to other political and economic baskets greatly undermines the authenticity of an effective intercultural dialogue.
7. ***The divergence in political systems between North and South is another persistent challenge to an effective intercultural dialogue.*** In light of the prevailing authoritarian rule in most Arab countries involved in the EMP, advocating democratization, respect for human rights and minorities, empowerment of women as agents for change, educational reform, and inclusion of civil society actors is becoming an empty talk. Apart from restrictions on the freedom of mobility from the South to the North, evidence proves that governments in the south object to the flow of resources to non-governmental entities on their territories. Noting the fact that the EU itself is not willing to genuinely advocate democratization and human rights in the Southern countries because of the political and strategic importance of the authoritarian regimes there, the talk about intercultural dialogue becomes rather a practice between the elites of these countries and a constant rhetoric empty of substance.
8. Intercultural dialogue is challenged by ***the mainstream trend to focus on what cultures and religions have in common***, rather than what are the differences, how to understand and accept the other as is and how to manage diversity. Related to this point is the prevailing either ignorance or intolerance about sensitive issues linked to religions and others' sacred beliefs, which leads to rendering many forms of intercultural dialogue rather superficial.

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