

In the Aftermath of the Changes: Problems and Future of Euro- Mediterranean Relations

UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCE HASSAN BIN TALAL

Foreword

On Monday, July 25th, 2011 various experts from academic institutions as well as non-governmental organizations came together to discuss the problems and the future of the relations between Europe and the Middle East in light of the so called "Arab Spring". A focus of the international conference was on Muslim-Jewish-Christian relations in the two regions and the promotion of inter-faith dialogue. As the event was held on the basis of the Chatham House Rule, the following report will summarize the main topics and issues discussed in the conference without quoting any participant.

The Arab uprisings provided Europe with the opportunity to reinforce and intensify a cooperative Euro-Arab relationship based on the common values of democracy, peace, and human rights as already framed in the Barcelona Process in 1995. The protests have shown the motivation and will of especially young people for changes and democracy. Today, more than six months after the beginning of the Arab Spring, the situation in various Arab states, such as Egypt or Syria, shows that we have not yet reached the aftermath of the changes but are still in the changes. Europe's role in this process of democratization has the potential to make a significant difference for the future of the Euro-Arab relationship. Therefore, a focus of this conference has been on European policies regarding the current situation in the Middle East.

However, the relationship between the Arab states and Europe, respectively, the West in general as well as the relation between and within the Arab states themselves has been influenced by inter-religious conflicts for decades, particularly Muslim-Jewish problems with regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict. This has to be taken into account in the discussion and successful promotion of the relations between the regions. Yet, also the relation between Christians and Muslims contains many problems in Europe as well as in the Arab world. The tragic terror attacks that have recently been carried out in Norway by a Christian extremist have shown once again the destructive potential of failed multiculturalism, and the need for further promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding. Problems and Future of Euro-Arab relations. After hearing the presentations, two main aspects influencing the current and future relations between Europe and the Arab world were raised for discussion:

- Directions in the Euro-Arab policies since the beginning of the Arab Spring
- The role of the Israel-Palestine conflict in the future relations

Throughout the discussion participants gave thoughtful opinions as well as concerns regarding the different aspects. There have been no doubts that Europe highly appreciates the changes in the Arab world and is willing to support the spirit of the revolution. This willingness finds expression

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in various policy implementations of the European Union (EU) such as the SPRING program (Support for Partnership, Reform, and Inclusive Growth) by the European Commission, the European Endowment for Democracy, and a 40% increase in funds for the Erasmus and Marie Curie education programs. Overall, the financial commitments to the Mediterranean states will rise to €7 billion in the coming three years. Thus, these implementations show that the EU does take directions. However, the question posed by participants has been whether these directions, respectively, policies, are new and appropriate for the future Euro-Arab relations in light of the current situation in the Middle East - the discussants agreed that they are neither nor. Despite their financial as well as political support for democratization, the EU has still not changed its general policies with the Arab states. For instance, it hesitates to accept democratic elected regimes if their aims are not conform with Europe's ideas of democracy; it prioritizes concerns of immigration and security over democratic reform; it does not open its Agrarian market to the Arab states; it asks for enduring peace and stability but does not accept the short-term costs in the process of democratization; and it still seems to be unwilling to accept Palestine as a state. These indicators make clear that although the EU welcomes the Arab Spring, it is not ready to give its relations with the Arab world a new direction. In this context, the question of the European or Western interests in the Arab revolution and the Arab world in general was posed. Participants raised the concern that Europe is acting with a double standard as its interest for democracy seems to be higher in those states which offer economic incentives for the West. The discussants concluded that the EU has to realize that in the long term it is in its own interest to have a democratic Middle East, but that it therefore needs to accept the short term costs of the process in order to reach long term democracy. Additionally, there are many ways to democracy. Europe should not expect the Arab states to take the most peaceful one but led them find their own way.

The second issue discussed had been the influence of the Israel-Palestine conflict on the Euro-Arab relations. Participants agreed that although the EU has the power to change the situation to a significant extent, it does not seem to be serious in solving the conflict as its actions against the state of Israel are not convincing. As a result, the Arab population feels inhibited to trust Europe. In this context discussants pointed to the role of Turkey regarding the future Euro-Arab relations. Turkey's application to accede to the EU and the ongoing negotiations have a significant influence on the situation. Due to the fact that Turkey is not only an Islamic country but also a European country it has a lot of soft power in this conflict as a Turkish accession could positively affect the Arab mentality towards the EU as an actor welcoming Arab states and could, hence, improve future Euro-Arab relations. Yet, ongoing rejections of the state of Turkey combined with a reverse attitude regarding a solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, significantly hinder the development of positive relations between the regions. In contrast, in the case of Eastern Europe, the EU was ready to offer EU membership to the democratizing nations in order to support the establishment of the rule of law and democracy. However, the EU is not equally willing to offer the same to Turkey and the Arab states.

Problems and Future of Muslim-Christian-Jewish Relations in the Middle East

The second part of the conference focused on the problems and the future of Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations in the Arab states. The presentations as well as the following discussion pointed out that a pluralism of religion needs to be accepted and supported throughout the Middle East. Therefore, the following aspects require significant promotion:

- Dialogue between Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars.
- The will of Christians and Jews to integrate themselves in the respective

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country and, hence, the participation in society.

- The respect of Muslims towards other religions.
- The decrease of visions of enemies.
- Solving the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In practice, these demands require the improvement of minority rights in the Middle East as well as the ambitions of experts to genuinely improve the dialogue through conferences and debates. Here, clerics from all three religions can make an important contribution. However, it has also been stated that the integration of Arab-Christians has worked well in various Arab countries. These cases should work as positive examples for other states as well as for the integration of Jews within the Middle East. The fact that Islam, Judaism, and Christianity share the same eponym Abraham and have further important similarities in their faith, should be a motivating factor in making dialogue between the groups possible. Yet, without a political solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, a genuine improvement of the inter-religious relations, mainly between Muslims and Jews, seems unlikely.

Problems and Future of Integrating Muslims in Europe The integration of Muslims in Europe has been on the political agendas for years, even decades. In contrast to most Christians in the Arab world, Muslims in Europe still have the status of migrants – not Europeans. Hence, the process of integration has failed in many parts of Europe.

The presenters and contributors addressed the issue of integration from a legal as well as a social perspective. From a legal perspective, the full integration of Muslims into Europe is inhibited by two structural problems. First, whilst many European states follow the principle of secularism – which refers to the separation of the state from religion – various Muslim groups in Europe have difficulties to adjust to this separation. The second structural problem refers to the issue of religious freedom.

Whilst all member states of the European Union recognize and guarantee the right to freedom of religion as well as the fundamental right to human dignity, some Muslim groups might not fully respect these rights and, thus, clash with European law. Some participants, however, noted that these structural issues need to be solved within the Muslim communities in the first place; they have to accept secularism – and, hence, a separation of Islam and state – and have to be willing to solve questions of human dignity.

From the social perspective it has been presented that whilst Muslims gathered together for a long time and were rather ‘invisible’ they lately became more ‘visible’ since their community grew significantly during the last years. Therefore, the institutionalization of the Islam through, for instance, the building of mosques and Islamic schools, or the wearing of the hijab has increasingly been demanded. This development is seen by a large part of the non-Muslim population as an obstacle to the process of integration. As a result, Muslims, or even the Islam in general, are widely assessed as ‘incompatible’ with European identities. Subsequently, the problem of ‘Islamophobia’ and, hence, fear of Muslims becomes more and more distinct throughout Europe. A result of this phenomenon is increasing discrimination of Muslims. Also the recent terrorist attack in Norway has been an attack against Muslim immigrants, although it targeted mainly young native Norwegians. Some participants further highlighted the phenomenon of ‘isolation’ which is typical for minorities.

Thereafter, Muslims tend to isolate themselves from the society and prefer to stay in a Muslim community. The discussants concluded that in order to improve future integration of Muslims in Europe, it needs the will to integrate them, as well as their will to become part of a European society. This does not necessarily require giving up traditions or even faiths but the intention to respect and accept the other religion. Here, especially Muslim and Christian clerics can actively promote mutual understanding. In sum, successful

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multiculturalism requires the acceptance of people with other religious and cultural background as equal.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring has not yet led to distinct changes in the Euro-Arab relations which is not only due to the transition period and the ongoing protests, but also a result of Europe's static position towards the Arab states. A positive change in the relations requires a mutual approach of the regions regarding their policies and their religious attitudes, as well as a change of Europe's position in the Israel-Palestine conflict. As already pointed out throughout the report, mutual dialogue and understanding is of utmost importance for the future of Euro-Arab relations. As this roundtable has been a meeting of European and Arab scholars and experts, including clerics, the conference can be assessed as an important step in the promotion of inter-regional as well as inter-faith dialogue. However, due to the current developments in the Middle East, and especially with regard to the upcoming voting of the UN General Assembly in September 2011 that will decide about Palestinian statehood, it seems necessary to hold further debates. Therefore, participants suggested to organize a second conference at the beginning of next year; this time possibly in Beirut.

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