

Obama: From the University of Cairo to the Mavi Marmara

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On my last visit to the United States this year, while en route to Rio de Janeiro to participate in the 3rd Alliance of Civilisations Forum, numerous questions on the state of relations between the West and the Muslim-Arab World naturally crossed my mind. In today's American society, as in the majority of societies, a wall continues to separate citizens of both worlds, often sowing misunderstanding and causing defensiveness.

A year has gone by since Obama's famous Cairo speech and clear, visible changes in the situation of the debate on relations between these two worlds continue to make way, although the situation seems not to have experienced major developments.

It is true that efforts are constantly being made for reconciliation between the West and Islam. Important forums such as the Alliance of Civilizations, Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue and institutions like the IEMed or the Anna Lindh Foundation are working tirelessly to promote meetings of intellectuals, journalists, women and young representatives of organizations from Western or Arab-Muslim countries, to establish mechanisms raising awareness of the importance of work conducted on this topic. Obama himself has recently joined the ranks of activism for better understanding between the West and the Muslim world, all the more important considering this issue is deeply rooted in the very fabric of American society.

Nonetheless, the state of affairs has not been evolving in the right direction. The tensions between the Arab and Muslim world and the West are still highly significant and there seems to be no sign of abatement visible at the end of the tunnel. Last year was marked by a series of incidents very eloquently show-

ing that the gap between the two worlds remains wide, or is even expanding. Events such as the attack against the Egyptian woman, Marwa El Cherbini, murdered in a very Court of Justice in Dresden while testifying in a case of racism, or the bill of law to prohibit the construction of minarets in Switzerland, contradicting the basic principles of human rights, speak for themselves and reflect the rise of Islamophobia in many parts of Europe. In the Muslim world, the situation is no less difficult. The recent attempted bomb attack in Times Square in New York by an American of Pakistani origin illustrates that anti-Western sentiments still run very strong in certain parts of the Muslim world and the problem of relations with the West remains a serious issue that continues to have consequences that are, at times, tragic.

So, why is this? Obama's objectives as expressed through his speech on June 4, 2009 seemed clear: to address the majority of Muslims, reach out to them and explicitly state his commitment, as president of the most powerful country on earth, to the cause of dialogue and understanding between the West and the Arab-Muslim world. Through his speech at the University of Cairo, the President of the United States wished to highlight the fact that in reality, Muslims and Westerners have more things in common than not. Dalia Mogahed, an American of Egyptian origin recently appointed by President Obama as advisor at the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships always insists that the majority of Muslims are comparable to Westerners. She states that a great deal of studies and research carried out indicate through facts and figures that the majority of Muslims and Westerners share exactly the same objectives and ambitions insofar as, for instance, planning their lives. She also affirms that in both worlds, people's main concerns are to afford their families better living conditions, have a

SECOND AND THIRD ALLIANCE OF CIVILISATIONS FORUMS

The Alliance of Civilisations held its 2nd and 3rd official meetings (forums) in Istanbul on 6-7 April 2009 and Rio de Janeiro on 27-29 May 2010. This UN organisation established in 2005 on a Spanish initiative seconded by Turkey met for the first time in Madrid in January 2008, under the leadership of its High Representative, Jorge Sampaio, the former President of Portugal.

The purpose of the Alliance is to foster cooperation between Arab and Western States in order to encourage dialogue among cultures and religions. The Alliance is composed of a Group of Friends, consisting at present of some hundred countries and international organizations, though the number is steadily increasing. Indeed, nearly 2000 participants attended these two latest Forums. Heads of State and government, ministers, religious leaders and members of civil society met to enter into what Sampaio described as "productive dialogue." The Alliance's priorities can be divided into four main fields of action: education and the media, which are vectors for mutual comprehension, are two of them; issues relating to youth and migrants, who are actors of intercultural dialogue, are the remaining two.

The great success of the Forum is undoubtedly to have attracted the attention of NATO, its Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen announcing he would make a priority of intensified cooperation with countries with a Muslim majority. The participants applauded the interest taken in the Alliance by a military organization, considering it a success for "soft diplomacy." Moreover, some of the most significant successes of the previous year's Forum were the report drawn up on the role of the private sector in promoting intercultural dialogue ("Doing Business in a Multicultural World") and the creation of an online resource to connect journalists and experts (Rapid Response Media Mechanism).

The 2nd Forum was an opportunity to take stock of progress made in the projects launched at the Madrid Forum, as well as to start new projects. The initiatives proposed in Istanbul revolve around several focal ideas: the role of the media (including the new media) in cultural dialogue, as well as the education of these media; youth participation in decision-making; the capacity of youth to obtain employment; stepping up academic exchanges; etc.

Moreover, at the plenary sessions, speakers reiterated their commitment to dialogue among cultures and religions, in a context of crisis in which States have the tendency to apply national policies to resolve global problems. The General Secretary of the Arab League, Mr. Amre Moussa, recalled that intercultural tension could not disappear as long as the Israeli-Arab conflict continued. And finally, it was emphasised that education and knowledge of the Other constituted the indispensable prerequisites for building peace.

The Euro-Mediterranean dimension is not absent from the Alliance of Civilisations' concerns, since it closely collaborates with the Anna Lindh Foundation, which participated in the morning sessions on Euro-Mediterranean Partnership issues and on the Euro-Mediterranean example of interregional dialogue among the media.

By the same token, at the 3rd Alliance of Civilisations Forum, several sessions were held on the Alliance's topics of predilection: religious issues and the struggle against Islamophobia, the role of education in empowering women and the importance of public-private partnership. Among the novelties of this Forum were the launching of the first two "Dialogue Cafés" in Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro. Thanks to videoconference technology, Dialogue Cafés allow people with different backgrounds to exchange ideas and collaborate at a distance on new projects dealing with four main topics: intercultural dialogue, social innovation, civil society participation and culture. Due to its great success, there are already plans to extend this initiative to the Mediterranean Region as of 2011, starting with Istanbul and Ramallah.

Furthermore, several events were announced, such as the first Alliance of Civilisations summer school, which will take place in Aveiro, Portugal, or the creation of the United Nations University's International Institute for the Alliance of Civilisations in Barcelona.

The 4th Alliance of Civilisations Forum will take place in 2011 in Doha, the capital of Qatar.

For further information:

www.aocistanbul.org/default.en.mfa

www.unaoc.org/rioforum/

decent job and give their children a better education. Some very powerful, persuasive remarks showing that differences, if there are any, are superficial rather than profound and that, whether in the Western or the Arab and Muslim worlds, we are all human beings guided by the same instincts and the same emotions.

Convinced by the results of numerous polls and studies carried out by Gallup and acting on his own convictions, Obama went to Cairo with the intention of addressing the great mass of moderate Muslims who, beyond all doubt comprise the overwhelming majority of practitioners of that faith. According to Mogahed, the intention of the US President was actually to create a front uniting US Muslims with those from the rest of the world around moderate values and prac-

tices and attempt to exclude and marginalize extremists. Mogahed had contributed to the presidential speech, adding some of the proposals contained in the text. Obama is also perfectly aware that those who exploit Islam for political purposes and promote hatred and violence against others represent only a tiny minority of believers.

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In addition, and to lend strength to his argument, Obama recalled in his Cairo speech that Islam also represents a large section of the population in the cultural and religious mosaic of his country, and stated that the 7 million American Muslims were no different from those living in the rest of the world.

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But would this be sufficient to settle the problem of relations between the West and the Arab and Muslim world? Unfortunately, the answer to this question seems to be “no.” Why didn’t the strategy so carefully prepared by Obama and his team work?

Considering the issue from the Muslim perspective, it can be said that President Obama initially managed to win over the public, especially when he committed to exert the greatest efforts in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian problem, so important to all members of the Muslim community. However, subsequent events demonstrated that the United States was not really sincere in its intentions, especially in its unconditional defence of Israeli practices against Palestinians. Over the course of the year following Obama’s famous visit to Cairo, Muslims have been repeatedly disappointed by the inconsistency between Obama’s words and American positions, always biased in favour of the Hebrew State. Once again, the United States has shown itself incapable of adopting any measures condemning Israel for the worst of its crimes, such as the blockade and collective punishment of the population of Gaza, or more recently, the attack against the flotilla of humanitarian activists during which nine people died under fire from Israeli commandos.

