

Building closer relationships between the European Union and the Arab world

The following ideas should serve as inspiration for an action plan to improve relations between the European Union and the Arab World including countries in the wider Middle East. It is important that the measures mainly build on existing national and EU policies. We should not aim at costly new structures, but rather a new strategic focus through better coordination of a number of existing measures, while not excluding new ones to complement them. The European Union should show partners involved that the process envisaged is of mutual interest. Partners should feel co-ownership for such a process.

Building closer cooperation with a vanguard of willing partner countries

With a view to revitalize the Barcelona-framework and in light of the New Neighbours Initiative a closer dialogue could be offered to interested countries with the perspective of a closer economic, political and cultural cooperation over and above the current association agreements. In return such countries should commit themselves to a process of modernisation, development and reform. The European Union could assist in improving educational systems, developing the private sector, upgrading the social sector, introducing further democratic standards, pluralism, independent media, reinforcing legal systems and enhancing women's participation in their societies. The EU must systematically support steps in the direction of greater rule of law and better governance.

Developing a regional stability strategy for the Eastern Middle East

The Barcelona-framework and the New Neighbours Initiative do not include countries in the Eastern Middle East and the Gulf region (Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Yemen). Some of these countries are already in the process of establishing a dialogue or cooperation agreements with the European Union. The European Union could establish a new and separate cooperation track with such countries by creating a regional stability strategy. In particular, issues related to regional security and stability would be relevant. This could for example be soft security confidence building measures and cooperation on issues such as organized crime and terrorism. It should be seen in the context of activities by other organizations. Further, the European Union could assist in improving educational systems, developing the private sector and promoting democratic building blocks like independent media and enhancement of women's participation in their societies. Such cooperation should also include the potential of free trade agreements.

Making economic globalization an inclusive process

Economic globalization should be an inclusive process. Together with multilateral organizations the European Union could try to promote economic opportunities. Trade barriers would have to be lowered (the agricultural area could be of special importance here), increased regional economic integration as well as living up to WTO standards, would facilitate transformation into more liberal market economies. Further facilitation of inter-regional trade is also important. At the same time, the European Union should promote approaches and policies that could reduce inequality and exclusion in the region. Capital availability in the European Union and in the Arab World and abundant human resources in many Arab countries offer great possibilities for further cooperation.

Improving private sector investment facilities

[The Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) within the European Investment Bank has now been operating with success in its first year of service. By reinforcing the facility or transforming it into a majority owned EIB-subsiary the development of loan products tailored for private sector needs in the Mediterranean region would be strengthened. Further, a transformation of FEMIP to a majority owned EIB-subsiary would lead to greater regional ownership and influence on loan decisions.]

Enhancing political and cultural dialogue

Political dialogue at the governmental level, although important, is not enough. In addition Europe must engage in and encourage dialogue not only with secular or pro-Western, but also with interested non-violent religious political movements.

The European Union should take steps to enhance the overall political and cultural dialogue at both the governmental and non-governmental level. There is also a need to strengthen people-to-people contacts with a view to strengthening moderate voices. The European Union should also bring forward concrete proposals on how to create a better understanding of the Arab world in Europe and vice versa. Europeans with an Arab background could play a positive role in such an endeavour.

Establishing a permanent dialogue on political and religious extremism

Extremism is a major threat for dialogue between the Western and the Arab world. The European Union is also facing the problem of political extremism in various parts of the society. Our understanding of the background and the motives of such extremist groups is still incomplete. We need to build a common expertise to identify the extremist groups, their relations and the root causes for extremism. In particular we should analyse the alienation and impact of extremism among the younger generations. We should also uncover the links between extremist groups and terrorism and describe the role of extremism for political development. The Euro Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue of Cultures could be a focal point for such research activities.

Empowering Women

As noted by the Arab Human Development Reports support for reform of women's legal and political rights is desperately needed. Where national legislation sustains gender inequality, the European Union should actively solicit both Governments and relevant Parliaments for change. The issue of limited application of international agreements in national legislation is an important problem. The European Union should substantially strengthen its support for active and influential NGO's and women's networks working to promote gender equality, with a special focus on equal legal and political rights. Finally, special attention should be given to ensure that EU programmes in the Middle East and North Africa are, as far as possible, equally accessible to men and women.

Create common media projects

The media is of paramount importance to the perception of other cultures and religions. Common media projects could induce political debate on common topics across borders. Internet is of particular importance especially among young people. EU-presence via a dialogue-website in Arabic, Farsi, English and French should be a priority project. A common radio/TV station could produce programmes about Europe and the Arab world based on independent journalistic standards. The European Union could also consider establishing a training centre for journalists. Such activities could be financed from the present European programmes covering the Mediterranean region. In this context it would be of importance to train female journalists and in this way make women more visible in Arab societies. Also the lack of press protective legislation is a matter of concern.

Developing a common network for emergency assistance

To reduce the number of civilian casualties in relation to emergency situations (floods, earthquakes, forest fires, pollution etc.) a joint European/Arab response force could be created. Such expertise available in the Western and the Arab world could be reinforced through common planning, sharing of information, participation in common training exercises and agreements on mutual assistance.

Reinforcing education and science

As pointed out in the recent Arab Human Development Report (2003), improving education and research in the Arab world will be one of the key preconditions for a sustainable economic and political development. The European Union could consider increasing the number of scholarships etc. offered to men and women from the Arab World. This would help building stronger people-to-people ties between the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Further, the European Union could consider establishing a special fund for development of education, science and know how in the Arab World and the wider Middle East. The European Union should also pay attention to the question of providing the proper facilities for Islamic studies on the European continent. Such facilities could serve as the basis for political and religious discussions among moderates - as an alternative to private schools or institutions related to the extremist political and religious environment.