

## **Summary by the Co-Chairmen**

### **"Europe and the Arab World Connecting Partners in Dialogue" Joint Initiative of Austria and the League of Arab States Ministerial Meeting Vienna, 19 December 2008**

Ministers and high level civil society representatives of the Member States of the European Union and the League of Arab States met on 19 December 2008 in Vienna for an international conference "Europe and the Arab World – Connecting Partners in Dialogue" organised jointly by Austria and the League of Arab States under the co-chairmanship of H.E. Michael Spindelegger, Austrian Federal Minister for European and International Affairs, and H.E. Amre Moussa, Secretary General of the League of Arab States.

Ministers stressed the importance of regular and institutionalised dialogue and recalled the EU-Arab League Ministerial Meeting in Malta in February 2008 as a decisive step in this direction. Ministers also welcomed the new structures of the Union for the Mediterranean, especially the co-chairmanship and full participation of the Arab League Secretariat.

Participants recalled that Europe and the Arab World are closely linked by historical, geographical and cultural bonds but also by the common challenges our societies face today, such as the need for political and social reforms in the light of the international financial and economic crisis, the need for strategies to cope successfully with migration and integration and the need to promote peace, development, security and stability, and fight terrorism while fully respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. Dialogue was seen as a means to confront these common challenges more effectively both at regional and global levels.

While questions of religion and religious identities feature prominently in today's media coverage and cross-cultural relations, participants stressed that relations should not be dominated by them. They underlined the fact that both Europe and the Arab World were characterised by ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and welcomed the presence of high-ranking representatives of various faith communities at the Ministerial Meeting.

The Vienna meeting was held in a spirit of mutual respect and openness. Participants reaffirmed their commitment to peace and the respect of democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms as core elements of the dialogue between Europe and the Arab World.

Ministers confirmed the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative adopted in 2002 in Beirut and acknowledged by the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. They expressed their support to the activities of the Arab League to promote steps towards its implementation and called for visible efforts by all parties in the near future in order to achieve peace in the Middle East ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

For the first time, the Vienna meeting brought together representatives from governments, civil society and religious communities from the Member States of the EU and the Arab League to discuss common concerns and concrete partnership initiatives. Taking note of the recommendations of the expert meetings held on 17 and 18 December 2008, ministers stressed the importance of strengthening women's active participation in the different dimensions of society and politics, promoting civil society activities, and listening to the hopes and concerns of youth in order to enhance the development of European and Arab societies and cooperation within and between our respective regions.

Strengthening the participation of women in public, economic and societal life by ensuring equal rights and equal investments in education, health and legal services was seen as an important means to promote sustainable development and prosperity. Participants acknowledged the important contribution of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women to this end. Austria and the Arab League undertook to support capacity building and exchange of Arab and European women members of parliament as well as the establishment of a network on interreligious and intercultural dialogue from gender perspectives.

Participants considered the development of a vibrant civil society as well as the promotion of pluralism and diversity management as crucial preconditions for social cohesion. They noted that an intensified exchange on diversity would contribute positively to mutual respect and better understanding between the citizens of Europe and the Arab World, including in the context of migration. Participants also stressed the need for initiatives in the field of civic education and human rights education and welcomed in this regard the UNESCO sponsored Human Rights Manual, which could serve as a basis for intensified cooperation between Europe and the Arab World in this field.

Participants stressed the importance of integrating youth and young adults into intercultural dialogue activities as an effective contribution to fighting racism, xenophobia and stereotypes on all sides and to the prevention of radicalisation and extremism. Investing in education and student exchange programmes between Europe and the Arab World was seen as a priority. Suitable universities needed to be identified in both regions to intensify cooperation on scholarship and twinning programs.

Ministers agreed on the need to institutionalise dialogue efforts and European-Arab cooperation by setting up units for dialogue within their respective administrations and ensuring a regular exchange among them. They also agreed to set up a small steering committee within the next months to guide substantial and procedural preparations for a follow-up meeting. Austria and the Arab League announced their intention to initiate a staff exchange programme for diplomats in the field of dialogue.

Ministers welcomed the holding of an EU-Arab League Ministerial Meeting in Egypt in 2009 as well as the decision to establish a Liaison Office in Malta within the framework of the Malta Initiative.