

“Europe and the Arab World – Connecting Partners in Dialogue”

Joint Initiative of Austria and the League of Arab States

Dialogue efforts between Europe and the Arab world, between “the West” and “the Muslim world” have been considerably intensified in recent years. Recognizing the manifold positive effects of such efforts, however, often the differences have been stressed rather than our common concerns and potentials. This conference aims to underline the common challenges faced by Europe and the Arab world and to create effective networks to find common solutions and handle these challenges successfully.

Austria has a long standing tradition in dialogue activities and it was also under the Austrian EU-Presidency in the first half of 2006 that the Council conclusions clearly announced that “the EU and its Member States will actively promote dialogue, mutual understanding and respect through all existing mechanisms, including the Barcelona process and the Anna Lindh Foundation as well as the ASEM process.”

The conference is based on the first Foreign Ministers’ Meeting of the European Union and the League of Arab States in Malta on 11 – 12 February 2008. In the Malta Communiqué, ministers stressed the importance of dialogue between the 27 EU member states and the 22 members of the League of Arab States guided by the principle of mutual respect. Ministers reaffirmed that their commitment to peace and the respect of democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, remain central in the dialogue between the EU and the League of Arab States. The conference “Europe and the Arab World – Connecting Partners in Dialogue” should give impetus to strengthening relations and partnership between the European Union and the League of Arab States.

Focussing on partnership between European and Arab states, the conference also aims at strengthening the principles laid down in the “Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean”, on 13 July 2008. The dialogue between cultures also features prominently in the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean. Heads of State and Government affirmed their “ambition to build a common future based on the full respect of democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as enshrined in international human rights law, such as the promotion of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, strengthening the role of women in society, the respect of minorities, the fight against racism and xenophobia and the advancement of cultural dialogue and mutual understanding.”

This joint initiative of Austria and the League of Arab States would like to give impetus to these commitments and the dialogue process in three areas (workshops 1-3) by discussing and following up on our societies’ potentials and capacities.

The objectives of the conference are

- Establishing Arab and European countries’ networks for partnership projects;
- Intensifying exchange among experts from academia, civil society and state institutions of European and Arab countries;
- Discussing the common challenges and workshop recommendations at ministerial level and promoting concrete follow up initiatives;
- Establishing a framework for regular exchange on the dialogue of cultures between the European Union and the League of Arab States.

WORKSHOP 1: Strengthening Women in Society, Public Life and Dialogue

The workshop will discuss social, political and legal measures to strengthen the role of women in society, public life and dialogue in the Arab world and Europe. How can we improve our exchange of experiences, how to create and strengthen effective networks for co-operation? How to enhance women's rights and eliminate all forms of discrimination in order to make use of societies' full potentials? How to promote women's participation in politics and parliament? How to create effective networks for women in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue? Also the situation of Arab and Muslim women as citizens in Europe and how to encourage their participation in politics, economy and society will be discussed.

WORKSHOP 2: Development of Civil Society, Pluralism and Diversity Management

The workshop will discuss the importance of civil society and the management of pluralism and diversity as crucial factors for sustainable development, social cohesion and peace at large. The workshop will discuss concepts of citizenship and how to promote citizens' rights and civic education in Europe and the Arab world. How to create a better understanding of diversity management in pluralistic societies? How to improve capacity building in the fields of legal, social studies and cross-cultural activities? The workshop should also identify strategies to create better regional and European-Arab networks in enhancing the exchange of experiences and co-operation.

WORKSHOP 3: Promoting Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Youth Participation in Politics and Society

Youth in the Arab world as much as in Europe constitutes a source of power and a major factor of innovation and progress. Youth needs to be considered a basic part in political and social participation and decision making. Where these factors are neglected, frustration, radicalization and extremism are on the rise. This workshop will discuss how to give youth a more effective role, how to mobilize youth for participating in civil society and politics. The workshop will also discuss identity formation of youth in the Arab world and Europe, including youth with a migrant background. How to effectively fight stereotypes on all sides, how to promote youth participation in inter-cultural dialogue and how to strengthen Arab-European co-operation in this field?

MINISTERIAL MEETING

Foreign ministers and ministers from the 27 member states of the European Union, Turkey and the 22 member states of the League of Arab States, and invited high level participants from politics, economy, society, culture and religious authorities will take part in the Round Table discussion.

Objectives:

- Discussing the recommendations of the workshops;
- Exchanging on how to strengthen European-Arab networks and co-operation;
- Discussing and promoting a framework for regular consultation on dialogue between Europe and the Arab world