

# EU-ISLAM DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT. FIVE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Although discussed for decades, the issue of cultural and religious values has been again brought into the political spotlight since the end of the 20th century. Today, a number of key political and state actors, including the European Union (EU), clearly consider dialogue and engagement with religious institutions and organisations vital resources for achieving stability, security and peace. The establishment of mechanisms and guidelines for dealing with religious organisations has thus been brought into the daily agendas of both domestic and international politics.

In this framework, one cannot deny the impact that specific events have produced on EU public opinion and policy-makers pushing towards such understanding. The acknowledgment of the potential of dialogue and engagement has gone hand in hand with growing concerns towards manipulation and politicisation of values and identities in the cultural, ethnolinguistic or religious dimensions. This seems particularly evident with regard to how Islam has been gradually brought into the focus of both intra-EU debate and in the relationship between Europe and its Mediterranean neighbourhood. During the 1990s, hard and soft political challenges in Europe and the Mediterranean and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States (US), followed by the Casablanca, Madrid and London bombings in the early 2000s, gradually heightened concerns. Such an emphasis on the need for dialogue and engagement has been recently intensified by the phenomenon of foreign fighters and the new wave of terrorist attacks in Europe.

Despite the fact that the EU's interest in culture and religion, especially with regard to Islam, seems to have been mainly determined by the traumatic events, it needs to be recognised that it also originated from seeing the profound reorientation of the international

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system, the developing reconfiguration of the relationship between state and non-state actors – with the increasing role of the latter – and finally the global transformation of religious demography and landscapes within and beyond Europe. Therefore, since the 1990s EU initiatives on intercultural and interreligious dialogue have been considered instrumental both to promoting a cohesive society within the EU and to establishing solid relationships with the rest of the world, in particular in the Mediterranean, with the aim of pursuing stability and security (Pace & Schumacher, 2013).

In this framework, two theses were particularly useful in discussing the relevance of issues of values in today's societies and polities (Thomas, 2010): that of the "Clash of Civilizations" and the "resurgence" theory.

In 1993 the Huntington hypothesis summarised in the "Clash of Civilizations" argued that religious, ethnolinguistic and cultural identities will be the main drivers of conflict in the post-Cold War globalising world. Such a theory substantially updated the binary logic of the Cold War, looking at culture and civilisations instead of ideology. Since the 1970s and with growing emphasis during the 1990s, secularist theories became increasingly contested by the idea that the world was not developing by leaving behind religion or considering it a mere private factor in the life of each individual but was changing by experiencing a substantial resurgence of the role of religion in politics and in society. Accordingly, it has been highlighted that a secularised Europe does not represent a model or the destiny of history but rather seems to be the exception. The theory of "resurgence" has frequently proposed religion as the main variable for understanding the rising challenges in managing today's societies, sometimes underestimating socioeconomic and political contexts while paradoxically reproducing a sort of bifurcation between secular and religious ones, especially when brought into the political debate.

In this regard, two distinct albeit intertwined strategies have been gradually proposed in order to confront the "Clash of Civilizations" theory and the "resurgence of the role of religion", opening new spaces of manoeuvre for state authorities and the EU in particular to establish meeting points. In both cases, it should be recognised that emphasis has been primarily placed on the issue of the encounter with Islam and Muslims (Silvestri, 2005). First, dialogue has become the key concept to confute the predicament of a world dominated by conflicts on the basis of religious and cultural identities, underlining that civilisations, states and communities have the choice and resources to build solidarities exactly on the basis of cultural and religious values. They are not doomed to struggle and clash. In this framework, a second strategy has been gradually proposed. Engagement has become the new stance for establishing meeting points with religious actors. The rationale behind this approach is essentially that, while religion is resurging in society, state authorities and diplomacy can at least show they are fully aware of the consequences and of the necessary steps to be taken in order to integrate their actions and initiatives in the interest of the whole social fabric.

In essence, dialogue and engagement have become ubiquitous terms in today's political and diplomatic grammar, despite the fact that it still remains an open question whether this new attitude towards the role of religion is based on the existence of a real consensus between all actors involved concerning what religion means in today's world: if it is a simple though important component of culture or needs to be understood as a cultural system per se.

In this regard, the EU has shown equal interest in and commitment to both strategies, integrating dialogue and engagement in its notion of soft power. Since the mid-1990s, it has been developing its external actions around them, in particular in its relationship with the Mediterranean and the so-called Islamic World with the Barcelona Process (1995). At the same time, the EU has developed its understanding of the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue to fostering cohesiveness and integration at the European level. The present policy brief aims to analyse EU dialogue and engagement with Islam in the Mediterranean contexts after the Arab uprisings. The aim is to reconsider how the EU has developed its approach to the Mediterranean and Islam in terms of intercultural and interreligious dialogue and engagement, shedding light on the existing opportunities for and challenges to such efforts.

### **Dialogue and Engagement between the EU and Islam in the Mediterranean after the Arab Uprisings**

The Arab uprisings, the war in Syria and the emergence of Islamic State (IS) gave a boost to developments that since 1995 were already occurring in the field of dialogue and engagement between the EU, Islam and the Mediterranean, both at the multilateral and bilateral level.

In reality, at the multilateral level the track record of the initiatives developed had been quite meagre during the first 10 years of the Barcelona Process. It is true that the Barcelona Process immediately gave intercultural dialogue a distinctive role in promoting a partnership between the EU and the Mediterranean, dedicating a full line of intervention to such work and designing an ad hoc field of intermediation. In fact, dialogue and respect between different cultures and religions were defined as the precondition for partnership, establishing the third chapter on "partnership in social, cultural and human affairs" as the ideal completion to support the other two baskets (economic and political) (Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 1995). Nevertheless, until the creation of the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) in 2005, dialogues between cultures and civilisations remained at the margins of the entire process (ALF, 2009). In this framework, the ALF was an important resource to reinforce the idea of enhancing EU relations within a region culturally and socially bound to the tradition and history of Islam, as expressed with the EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East of 2004 (Silvestri, 2005). At the same time, the Foundation concentrated more on the level of common heritage in the Mediterranean than on religious dialogue.

In fact, between 2003 and 2008, the EU showed that it felt much more comfortable working in this field at a bilateral level. In this regard, during this period Jordan and Morocco became two important partners in the field (Wolff, 2018). Beyond the merits of the efforts of these two countries, it is interesting to point out that the EU particularly appreciated their commitments because they were fully in line with its notion of dialogue (Gutkowski, 2016). The Amman Messages of 2004 and 2007 and the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams (2005) gave the EU the possibility to “delegate” and share with regional partners the responsibility of dealing with Islam (Wolff, 2018). While previously dialogue had been instrumental for communicating and transmitting European values to the region, it now became the strategy through which to communicate what Islam should be, outsourcing this task to authoritative voices in the region. The focus of the dialogue progressively centred on the notion of “moderate Islam” (Wolff, 2018), where interreligious and intercultural dialogue became increasingly integrated into the toolkit of anti-terrorism and counter-radicalisation. In this framework, the space for having a dialogic encounter was quite small. Dialogue was carried out as a hierarchical transmission of knowledge from official authorities.

Post-Arab uprisings’ challenges made references to dialogue and religion even more ubiquitous than in the past. Emphasis on the urgent need to reach out to all communities to foster cohesive and inclusive society combined with the perception of having not done enough in the past led to guidelines and action plans for efforts of dialogue and engagement. In the case of this last concept, the notion of religious engagement was permanently introduced into the vocabulary of the EU precisely during this period, becoming central to the EU’s relations with the Southern Mediterranean.

With the aim of focusing on some of the most interesting developments occurring since the Arab uprisings, one needs at least to look at two fields of intermediation and intervention, namely the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

At the level of the EU, since 2012 the EEAS has demonstrated increasing interest in issues of values, especially in the field of religion (Foret, 2017). It is at this level that the EU has most reflected on the theory of the “resurgence”, elaborating its vision of engaging the religious and developing religious literacy at the service of its diplomacy. Acting on the 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy and the Action Plan for the period 2015-2019, religious engagement represents a part of the EU’s broader commitment to empowering local actors and civil society organisations and engaging regional powers. While adopting again a self-explanatory definition of religion, the 2013 EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) concentrate the EU’s external action on engaging with religion through FoRB (Council of the European Union, 2013). Accordingly, the EU’s religious engagement and

the promotion of FoRB opened new room for manoeuvre. This development corresponds to a broader re-orientation of the international system on this topic opened by the US and already transposed to the level of the UN with the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB (2000) (Wolff, 2015). It is also important to highlight that such a vision has been espoused by direct initiatives in the Mediterranean with the 2012 Rabat Plan, the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration on defending the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries and the 2017 Beirut Declaration on “Faith for Rights” (Wolff, 2018). The emphasis on religious engagement seems to be enabling the EU to find a precise field of work, employing a more comfortable and known vocabulary with the simple need to update it and acquire religious literacy. Finally, religious engagement enables the EU to operate with traditional logics, focusing on the level of individuals and not religions while privileging state-sponsored forms of religion, official organisations and institutions. Being essentially connected to the art of diplomacy, the concept of engagement presents its own challenges and opportunities when applied to a field such as that of religion, especially in the case of Islam and the issues at stake. As already seen, one of the main risks is again reproducing the association of religion with conflict, acknowledging the role of dialogue but essentially engaging it within the realm of crisis management and counter-radicalisation. This can also reproduce a vision based on dichotomies (Foret, 2017). While this new attitude testifies to an important development in the EU’s approach to religion, this can easily be turned into a short-term vision. In fact, the conditions of engagement are crucial. It is important to resist the temptation to concentrate only on a minor component of religion, ignoring its global transformations. Acknowledging religion simply as an actor, a factor or a tool to pursue security and stability reproduces old dichotomies in an instrumental understanding of its role (Wolff, 2015). It does not view religion as a field in which a component of the socio-political fabric develops, going through transformations and changes. This understanding poses the risk of engaging religions as static and unchanging phenomena, rather than a vital and fluid fact. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the religious engagement can partially mitigate such a risk thanks to its attitude of encountering and establishing relationships with different actors, institutions and organisations. This stance can help to overcome the danger of approaching religions as monoliths, recognising their multivocal character.

Finally, coming to the level of the EU-Mediterranean relationship, the outcome of the High-Level Meeting on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in Barcelona (UfM, 2015) helps to elucidate the state of art in this field. Having been organised in partnership with the UfM, the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), the ALF and the EU, the meeting was in fact quite representative of the existing opportunities for and challenges to such enterprises in the region. Beyond acknowledgment of the “growing importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue for achieving stability and peace, fighting intolerance and extremism while upholding values of peaceful coexistence and

mutual understanding,” the final document of the initiative essentially specified a set of needs confirming the existing gap between the positive rhetoric of dialogue and the synergetic and coordinated commitment to dialogue (UfM, 2015). Moreover, it does not advance any shared and common understanding of what dialogue means and where it should specifically lead. The distinctive contribution of interfaith and interreligious dialogue is therefore considered again self-explanatory, without explicitly explaining what distinguishes such an exercise from political or security dialogue.

As a possible confirmation of the road ahead in this field, if one considers it necessary or appropriate to dedicate space to interreligious dialogue in the EU-Mediterranean framework, it is indicative to conclude by mentioning the exercise of dialogue developed in 2016 through the commitment and works of the ALF. This is the 2016 Valletta Agenda of the 3rd Euro-Mediterranean Forum on Intercultural Dialogue (ALF & UfM, 2016). Although for the ALF religious diversity and dialogue between cultures remain the focus, inherently approaching religion as a dimension of culture in the Mediterranean, one cannot ignore that in the 2016 Agenda the word “religion” did not even appear either per se or in connection with intercultural dialogue. The Agenda also avoided any direct reference to interreligious dialogue. It is quite indicative also that “Islam” or “Muslim” did not appear, whereas the issues of extremism and radicalisation have their own “independent” space. On the one hand, although the omission of a direct reference to “Islam” and “Muslim” when speaking about radicalisation can be considered (at least apparently) a positive development (one can say crucial for a better and more balanced understanding of the issues at stake) for avoiding traditional dichotomies or association between religion (specifically Islam) and security issues, this decision leaves it to the reader to make his/her own connections and associations. On the other, the complete omission of the word religion per se is significant because it inherently leaves open the question of how to conceptualise and understand its role and position in the dialogue. In essence, the initiative did not propose a new understanding or innovative position regarding the topic of religion and dialogue with Islam, and of the role of all parties involved in it. Rather, it seems inherently to confirm the idea of an EU that feels uneasy with dealing with or committing to interreligious dialogue in the EU-Mediterranean framework. When dialogue is contemplated, it is still interpreted as instrumental to reaching out to the Mediterranean. This is an important difference between the EU’s notion of dialogue and that of interreligious and interfaith initiatives developed by religious actors within which all parties involved are invited to be open to transformations and change through dialogue.

### Challenges and Opportunities

Although mainly referring to major official initiatives and documents, the policy brief aimed to point out the existing gap between the rhetoric about the need for dialogue and the elaboration of what dialogue is and should bring to the EU’s relationship with Islam and Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This seems to be

one of the most evident weaknesses in the history of EU dialogue in the Mediterranean. In this regard, further efforts in the field of dialogue and engagement would need to take into consideration the following challenges and opportunities:

- 1. Developing a more nuanced approach to dialogue.** Dialogue is often considered as a neutral concept, undoubtedly connected to a positive rhetoric. In reality, dialogue can reproduce and foster old hierarchies of power. It can be manipulated to pursue state interests and status. It can also be interpreted as an exercise in box ticking. These challenges can be overcome only by recognising that dialogue is where transformations happen. Initiatives on dialogue should be tailored on medium and micro-scale with mid- and long-term visions, avoiding the sensational emphasis on big events and conferences.
- 2. Going beyond old dichotomies.** Dichotomisation is still one of the most persistent risks for dialogue as well as the temptation to look at religion, especially Islam, as a monolith. It is responsible for continuing to reproduce the association between conflict and religion and especially between Islam, conflict and crisis. In this regard, even acknowledging that religious institutions and organisations have a positive and strategic role cannot avoid such a risk. In particular, the emphasis on moderate Islam is a formula that can be useful for easy communication but it intrinsically recreates a divide at multiple levels. The very category is ambiguous because it implicitly associates “moderation” with the absence of threat and conflict, securitising it and limiting the space for dissent. It is also necessary to increase awareness that today’s tensions are mostly developing within civilisations and cultures rather than between them. Moving beyond such categories can offer the chance to revise traditional hierarchies and go beyond old dichotomies. Accordingly, the EU should show more interest in the initiatives that are developing in the area, integrating their results into its internal debate and elaboration.
- 3. Increasing synergy and developing a shared vocabulary.** As seen above, one cannot ignore that the EU is dedicated to developing a better understanding of the role of religion and to pursuing dialogue with Islam in the Mediterranean, also through specific bilateral partnerships. In this regard, multiple platforms, institutions and ad hoc initiatives have played a role. Although in the EU perspective interreligious and interfaith dialogues should rationally remain only one of the facets of intercultural dialogue, it is important to better coordinate initiatives between all institutions and actors involved so that multivocality does not turn into vagueness and cacophony. Instrumentality in interreligious and interfaith dialogue should be reconsidered to avoid de-legitimising the actors and leaderships involved. Synergy and coordination, also in terms of the vocabulary employed, can create positive effects between intra-European debate and its external action, avoiding the

temptation to outsource elaboration of the role and position of Islam in today's society to local partners in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In this regard, a shared vocabulary to orient dialogue and engagement is of strategic importance to make the EU an active part of the dialogue, not solely the mediator.

**4. Investing in dialogue with people.** Although it seems rational and inevitable that the EU's state-centred and secular approach to religion manifests in dialogue with religious leaders and official institutions, it is of strategic importance to approach religion in a more dynamic way. Religion is not simply a component of a culture, it is a field within which and from which transformations develop. Engaging and dialoguing with religious leaderships is important but the EU needs to focus on grassroots level, involving people and local communities. Dialogue with and between people can be very productive and useful to understanding today's reconfiguration of spaces and boundaries both in politics and societies. A dynamic that is deeply testing religious and political authority. In this regard, the ALF is clearly better positioned in the Mediterranean context. It is through its initiatives that such an approach and understanding can develop. Nevertheless, one of the preconditions is to leave the field open to people to express what religion means in their daily life, beyond the imposition of roles in the dialogue and categories such as that of moderate Islam.

**5. Promoting collaborative projects.** In agreement with most recent proposals, interreligious and interfaith dialogue should involve individuals and concentrate on local levels, getting them involved in collaborative projects to ensure continued communication. In this regard, it is not only necessary to understand and know the religion of the other but to appreciate the religiosity of one's partner in the dialogue by experiencing pluralism in daily life, at school, in academia and at work. Pilot projects in these fields should be developed. Such an approach can bring fruitful results both in the perspective of dialogue with Muslims within Europe and between Europe and the Mediterranean, avoiding "governmentalisation", securitisation and a "state-centred approach".



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