MATERIAŁY

Euro-Islam: A conference on relations between European and Islamic cultures and on the position of Muslims in Europe, held in Stockholm, Sweden, June 15-17, 1995.

In late 1994, the Swedish government took the initiative to convene a conference on relations between European and Islamic cultures and on the position of the Muslims in Europe. It did so in the conviction that foreign policy should not be devoted solely to urgent or acute problems, but should also bear in mind essential long-term issues. Thereby, it was intended to deal not only with traditional international affairs but also with European domestic matters; in the sense of feasibility of integrating into the European societies the growing number of Muslim immigrants and citizens. Sweden, for example, with a population of less than nine millions, within a short period has received about 200,000 immigrants of Muslim background.

The conference did not have the character of an official inter-governmental meeting, but merely was a forum of about one hundred people – men and women – invited in their personal capacities by the Swedish Institute. The aim was not to discuss religious matters but to review cultural relations between Europe and the Islamic world.

The conference was opened by the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mrs. Lena Hjelm-Wallén. The opening session was also attended by a large number of the Stockholm diplomatic corps and invited guests from the

Swedish society. The speech of the Swedish minister was devoted to the necessity of confidence-building measures. Starting from the saying of ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, "We fear what we do not know", she expressed regret that "it still applies in far too many quarters, both in the West and in the Muslim world. Although, as a result of modern technology and communications, contacts between the Islamic world and Europe have never been as close as they are today, ancient suspicions still live on". In general, she dealt with the inherent risks of allowing prejudice and fear to grow between Europe and the Muslim world and also the danger of allowing extremist groups and politicians to use religion for obscure purposes. She warned that the old Cold War should not become replaced by a new perception of tension between Islam and Christianity.

A message to the conference was sent by Ḥasan II, King of Morocco. Read by his special emissary, it postulated "a comprehensive dialogue with Europe" and concentrated on misconceptions that exist between the three monotheistic religions. This can happen only through the development of common perceptions, mutual respect, and rejection of ready-made views and prejudices.

In turn, Manuel Marin, the Vice-President of the European Commission, regarded the fear of a confrontation between civilizations, expressed by the Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, as a regrettable example of a "new pessimism". He thought as possible to rebuild the cultural links between the two cultures that existed for a long time. Concerning the ten millions of Muslim immigrants, Mr Marin said that it is high time to view them as Muslim Europeans. According to him, it was important to improve the European educational system regarding knowledge about Islam and to enhance the role of mass media in the direction of a higher level of understanding of Islam.

‘Iṣmat ‘Abd al-Maǧīd, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, reviewed recent development in an increasingly complex scene of international relation, stating that Islam and Muslim have suffered tremendously from the abhorrent behavior which reflect a simplistic perception of this great religion of tolerance, coexistence and justice. Rejecting Huntingtons thesis of a possible clash between civilizations, he further said: "The Arab world and the Muslim world on one hand, and Europe on the other hand, cannot afford to turn their back to each other. Nor can they afford to reduce their relations to the level of mere political contacts and economic exchanges. Every time that mutual neglect and lack of dialogue were established, tension and crises followed". Many scholars and politicians now understand this. We have to study each other cultures and religions. These are tasks for both governmental and non-governmental institutions, and the Arab League

is eager to promote a dialogue with Europe. A Euro-Arab University in Grenada, Spain, is one of many possible cooperation projects Mr. 'Abd al-Mağīd said.

Dr Fatima Mernissi, distinguished scholar and lecturer in sociology gave a statement primarily concerning the situation inside Muslim countries. She claimed that the West had decided to support conservative and backward governments in the Arab world with the aim of maintaining control over their oil production. These governments have also been asked to append their money on buying armaments in the West in order to support the arms industry. She urged western countries, among other things, to refrain from supporting countries that are not offering basic rights to minorities and to women. She also questioned the aid given today by conservative Muslim countries to education programmes among immigrants in the West.

Finally, Muhammad Arkoun, prominent Algerian scholar and professor of the Sorbonne, gave a historical account of the role of Islamic scholars in transmitting the cultural legacy of Antiquity and the diddle Ages to Europe and the wealth of civilization that Muslims brought to the West. Europeans should stop claiming superiority in all fields in comparison with the Muslim world, he stated, In another statement during group discussions at the conference at a later time, Prof. Arkoun submitted a paper entitled: "Approach to Islam and Modernity Today". He traced the idea of modernity in its historical opposition to religious institutions. This rivalry developed in l8th century Europe, and involves major philosophical problems which are continuously discussed in the context of Western societies. But the political competition between the Christian – mainly Catholic – church and the secularized state has been imposed during colonial domination se a model to be followed by all societies. Muhammad Arkoun elaborated his idea as follows: "In our modern world, we would instead say that any policy – good or bad – is necessarily based on philosophical postulates. We can say, for example, that international law, since 1945, is based on the postulate that most advanced nations have the right to maintain by force – as they did in the Gulf War – the political frontiers traced since the l9th century. A new international law was promised during this war. The need for it has become more urgent since the collapse of the Yalta order, but legal activists and philosophical critics seem so exhausted by this prospect that political action is bound to be "pragmatic", limited to the protection of national interest and to vote-catching manoeuvres in the most liberal democracies. The exhaustion of political imagination certainly affects the cultural and intellectual expressions of metamodern thinking as much as the fragmented, highly specialized nature of knowledge disables political reason in its attempts to elaborate a new Weltanschauung encompassing ail the problems generated by decades of Cold War and wild liberalism".

Following the opening session, the conference proceedings continued within working groups organized to address the following six main themes of the meeting:

– How can stereotype scenarios and ideas of mutual threats be avoided?
– How can true exchanges of cultures and information be attained?
– What are the lessons of history and contemporary examples?
– Integration or isolation? How can cultural diversity be attained?
– Men, women and children in Islam.
– Religion, democracy and society – a vision of the future.

Group 1 A ("How we avoid scenarios of threat?") had as its main speaker Amin Malouf, a Lebanese author living in Paris. He emphasized that European culture and civilization is to a large extent a product of vast Arab and Muslim influence. Muslim immigrant communities in the West should not regard themselves as inferior, but rather as beneficiaries from both cultures.

Participants in the discussions noted that feelings of threat are to be found on several levels: between the West and the Muslim world, within the Islamic sphere, as well as between Muslim immigrants in Europe and their host countries. The term "political Islam" was questioned as unclear; instead – it was mentioned – one should differentiate between those, who live according to their Islamic faith and those, who utilise religion as an instrument of power.

A number of conclusions were drawn by this group, namely:

– Existing prejudices should be overcome by means of education, better textbooks, etc.

– A conference should be convened to tackle the problem of mass media misrepresentation of Islam in the West and of the West in Muslim countries.

– The convening of a conference on similarities between Islam and Christianity.

– The organization of an interfaith conference with the inclusion of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.

– A conference on democracy and human rights in the Muslim world could work out a formula that European countries should support only democratic movements,

– The strengthening of European Union programmed in the Mediterranean.

– The themes mentioned above should be .held and discussed at the Ionian University, Korfu, Greece. A similar offer was made by the Islamic Research Centre in Istanbul, Turkey.

– Both groups 1 A and 1 B decided to become formalized, i.e. to meet on an annual regular basis to promote dialogue on the areas of interest.

Group 1 B ("How to achieve true exchange of culture and information?") dealt with a wide range of subjects. It was asked above all: What will help to bring the Islamic and Western cultures closer? Attention was drawn to the multiplicity of Islamic cultures and also the need to distinguish between the concepts of "modernization" and "westernisation". In the context of cross-cultural work, the difficulty of poetry and prose translation into European languages was particularly emphasized. The participants warmly favored the possibilities of public education in Islamic visual art, exhibitions and museums of Islamic art in Europe.

An important part of the discussion was devoted to the cultural integration of Muslim immigrants into European societies, with special stress on methods of religious instruction for Muslim children in European schools. All general religious education should, according to the Norwegian Nansen school, be both critical and multi-confessional. There was unanimous agreement that "Islamiyyāt" (Islamic religious instruction) should be taught within the framework of the public school system of each particular European country, in the language of the host country and not in the mother tongue of the pupil; that is to avoid ghettoisation and to help the integration of the next generation. This has already been introduced in the German educational system at the initiative of converted Muslims, who fear that otherwise the new Muslims might one day become "Germany's new Jews".

It was considered urgent to eradicate stereotypes and false statements about Islam in European textbooks, as well as about the Western world from Muslim textbooks; to reduce a the existing prejudice about Islam among school teachers, and to urge mass media to avoid one-dimensional and sensational images of Islam in favor of more regular, fair and analytical coverage of its problems, such as the need for e civil society in Muslim countries and democratic institutions to develop.

As to Group 2 ("What are the lessons of history and contemporary examples?"), the following discussions took place:

History has often been used to justify an end; to provide reasons either to hate each other or to build bridges. Historians carry a great responsibility in presenting an objectively interpreted and factually correct history. Throughout history, Muslim-Christian relations have been overshadowed by conflict, competition or ridicule. It was suggested that it might lead to a better historiography if positive interpretations were used, but instead of that should present historical facts as they were objectively.

The term Euro-Islam was discussed. The European brand of Islam could mean an opportunity by offering a framework for coexistence. It could also provide Islam at large with a necessary intellectual tool for modernisation. An Islam with a modern living line of though should be able to challenge rigid Islam.

Secularism, it was argued, is easier to accept for Christians than for Muslims because Islam touches upon all aspects of life. In Christianity, it is easier to draw a distinction between religion and state. While Jesus lived and worked as a religious messenger with no political power, Muhammad was both a political and religious Prophet. Models of peaceful coexistence must be found and studied. One ought to think globally and act locally by first recognizing and respecting each others values.

Group 3 ("Integration or isolation – how can cultural diversity be attained?") listened to a key-note speech delivered by Gilles Kepel of France, who compared the immigration policies of France and Great Britain. One difference was related to the perception of citizenship. For the future, it was necessary to present comprehensive solutions concerning integration, especially directed towards young people.

The group reviewed many examples of living conditions for Muslim in European countries, such as the Turks living in Germany, or the different Muslim groups in Sweden. Strategies for the integration of Muslims into European societies were discussed, and institutional reforms were called for to improve the opportunities for Muslims to obtain full legal rights. Muslim communities were advised to form workshops, in which concrete proposals for action should be worked out and then presented to proper authorities.

Group 4 ("Men, women and children in Islam") heard a key speech of Salma Sobhan from Bangladesh. She noted that women in Muslim countries are today tackling issues of law reform, women's human rights and the interpretation of religious texts. She regretted the inability of Islam to find a development model compatible with the requirements of modern societies. In some parts of the Muslim world, the threats of the conservatives have brought together secular women and religious Muslim women to fight these attempts to subvert freedom of speech and conscience, which undermine the ideals of democracy. On the thesis Men and women in Islam, Mrs. Sobhan stated that a desirable society in Islam is one, in which principles of equality relate not only to political and property rights, but to relationships between sexes too. She then analyzed several Quranic texts relating to men and women, drawing the conclusion that there is no religious foundation for male superiority, right of guardianship, etc.

It was stated that what is termed as "fundamentalism" in Islam was as frightening to the majority of Muslims as it is to people in the West. The flexibility of Islamic thinking during the first centuries after Prophet Muhammad was contrasted to today's rigidity. Many regimes in the Muslim world today use religion as an instrument to maintain political control, it was stated, and this has a deep effect on the roles of men and women.

As for immigrants in the test, many of them clearly want to become part of the society of the host country, but they are often hindered by prejudice

and stereotype images of the majority population. It was noted that tradi-
tional roles in a Muslim society often clash with conditions in a welfare state,
such as – for instance, Sweden – where two salaries often are necessary to
support a family. High unemployment among immigrants is mainly due to
language difficulties, but also to discrimination – especially against those
Muslims who openly manifest their confession, e.g. by wearing a veil.
Young Muslim women are among those who bear the heaviest burden
regarding difficulty of integration,

Non-confessional education in Swedish schools was given as a problem
for both Muslim and Christian immigrants. Religious Muslim leaders were
urged to help by supporting the right of Muslim immigrants to follow their
religious confession in their host countries. The group discussed the role of
religion in a multicultural and secular society for ethical values and family
ties. It was concluded that a challenge arises for the West to open up to other
cultures, values and attitudes. It is important to build bridges between liber-
al and humanistic forces in the Muslim world and the West.

In Group 5 ("Religion, Society and Democracy: Visions for the Future")
the first two main speeches were delivered by Jawed Larijani of Iran and
Muhammad Arkoun. Mr. Larijani outlined the principles of an Islamic state,
giving Iran as an example. He argued that tolerance and right to criticize
exist in Iran. Criticism is needed to prevent corruption, while different inter-
pretations of Islam is beginning to be accepted. However, criticizing Islam is
still absolutely forbidden.

Mr. Arkoun, on the other hand, argued that Iran, although associated with
Islam, in fact was not Islamic in the sense of capturing the Islamic experience
in its totality. The Iranian revolution might none the less be seen as a model.
Iran should not be studied in isolation, but compared with experiences from
other countries, e.g. Lebanon and Sudan, he said.

Democracy, it was pointed out, has at least two important roles in this
regard: Firstly, institutions; elections, parties, the possibility and the method
of removing a leader and the right of a minority to have a future. Secondly,
basic attitudes towards democracy: a culture surrounding democracy such as
the freedom of choice in the various areas of life. Could, for instance,
a Muslim become president in a society dominated by non-Muslims, and
vice versa? Examples illustrating the problems faced by minorities in pursu-
ing their rights were given from India and Sudan. The question was raised,
whether some countries in the West were really interested in democracy in
Muslim countries.

The group concluded that there are many competing interpretations of
Islam. Since this religion is maintained by people who practice their faith,
hence Islam is bound to reflect human variations. It also raises the question

of whether it is meaningful to separate political and religious dimensions. Could it be that Islam in its political dimension really emerges as different from other comprehensive thought-structures?

At the concluding session, Professor Ṣādiq al-ʿAẓm of Syria gave summary of the main topics discussed at the conference. He first noted that Islam and Europe are two extremely unequal entities: in power, military might, productive capacity, efficiency, and so on. The stronger party, therefore, has much greater responsibilities than the weaker. Secondly, because of this inequality, Islam is absolutely no threat to the West. "We are the ones, who are really scared, not the West!" Thirdly, it is necessary to differentiate between true terrorism and acts of resistance. Professor al-ʿAẓm finally asked the question, whether Islam is compatible with the secular humanism prevailing in many western countries? In most cases, Europe has unconsciously answered this in the negative. But Islam has already proven itself to be greatly dynamic, responsive to widely differing environments and rapidly shifting historical circumstances. The conclusion is that Islam could, with the right intentions, come to terms and make itself compatible with such things as secularism, humanism, democracy, modernity and so on. In Iran, the ayatollahs did not restore an Islamic caliphate, but established a republic with popular elections, a parliament, etc., that has nothing to do with Iranian history but more with European patterns.

<div align="right">Hasan Jamsheer</div>