

ALLIANCE OF
CIVILIZATIONS
KEY ISSUES RELATING TO CULTURAL
EXCHANGE BETWEEN EUROPE AND THE
MUSLIM WORLD
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Introduction

- 1.1 This paper outlines key issues involved in supporting cultural exchange between European nations and nations with predominantly Muslim populations. It reviews the current context and some of the overarching considerations involved in promoting effective exchange. It also suggests strategies that could improve the prospects for exchange. This review was commissioned by the Alliance of Civilizations in preparation for its meeting on May 13, 2006.
- 1.2 The paper was prepared by Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford of AEA Consulting. It is based on a field scan, review of literature, and selected interviews. A brief sketch of a broad and complex landscape, this review is not in any way definitive. This paper is intended to highlight some of the most pressing issues and prominent opportunities, and raise questions for further discussion.
- 1.3 In this briefing, we use the term “cultural exchange” to cover an array of activities that broadly involve the movement of artists and arts professionals, humanists and scholars, and artistic or cultural materials between Europe and the Muslim world. We use the term “Muslim world” cautiously, realizing that there are at least 60 countries with predominantly Muslim populations, comprising between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people. Nothing so vast could be one “world,” and these nations and their cultures are infinitely varied. In fact, a number of countries with predominantly Muslim populations have states which are formally secular, Turkey being the most notable of these for its secular society, Muslim majority and historical connections with Europe. Equally, terms such as “Europe” and “the West” are used for the sake of convenience and with the knowledge that they contain a wide range of diverse cultures and experiences. We use this admittedly simple dichotomy as a tool to discuss some of the common barriers and opportunities in developing cultural exchange and mutual understanding between the variety of countries in the Muslim world and the West.

Current Context

- 1.4 The tension between the West and the Muslim world is pervasive. For many European countries, their relationship with the Muslim world has become the primary issue of public debate. It is difficult to open a European newspaper or view European TV without some news that relates to this issue, whether it is immigration policy, reactions to cartoonists’ representation of the Koran, or the war in Iraq. Many view Al Queda’s attack on 9/11 as the tipping point, although the anxiety and mistrust between extremist elements of the Muslim world and Western liberal democracies that led to that and subsequent terrorist attacks have been present for years. Some recent events in Europe make clear the critical nature of addressing this cultural and communication divide:

- The huge popularity and the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, an anti-immigration Dutch political candidate (2002).
- The public backlash and political barriers to the first new mosque in Spain in 500 years (2003).
- The murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by a fundamentalist Muslim for making a film criticizing Islam's treatment of women (2004).
- The bombings on public transportation in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) by Muslim extremists.
- The 20 days of riots and vandalism in an estimated 274 towns in France by disaffected Muslim youth (2005).
- Danish cartoons parodying Muhammad and the subsequent uproar in the Muslim world (2005).

1.5 While there are profound historical, economic and political roots that underlie these events, they highlight the struggle to come to terms with the cultural differences between Muslim and Western societies. This is true between Muslim countries and the West but also between Muslim and non-Muslim populations within European nations themselves. Although the causes and variations of this tension are too complicated to review in this short paper, we suggest that more intentional, extensive and sustained cross-cultural exchange can help to mitigate it and lead to greater understanding and cooperation.

1.6 The demographic makeup of Europe is shifting, as birth rates decline and immigration rates increase by approximately half a million each year, particularly from predominantly Muslim countries. The Muslim population in Europe has tripled over the last 30 years, according to a report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.¹ Between 15 and 20 million Muslims currently live in the European Union (about 3% of the total population), and this number is expected to grow to 10% by 2020 if current trends continue. In some urban centers the actual percentages are much higher.

1.7 Europe is being challenged to integrate a diverse population that is vastly different in religion and culture than native Europe. Unlike the "melting pot" of the United States, which has its own significant problems but is fundamentally a country of immigrants, European countries have historically been characterized by a common ethnic identity (and, in some places, fierce nationalism). Many Europeans consider even second and third generation immigrants to be foreigners. While immigration has been proposed as a solution to the problems brought by declining birthrates and aging populations in many European countries, it has catalyzed latent fears of cultural dilution and racial prejudices that are evidenced through a rise in nativist parties and xenophobic sentiments.

¹ David Masci. *An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe*. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. October 2005.



- 1.8 In part because they were initially welcomed as guest workers, many Muslims in Europe live in separate, parallel societies where poverty and rampant unemployment prohibit integration and fuel resentment, particularly among young adults and teenagers. Radical Islamist groups often take advantage of the lack of education and poverty in these Muslim enclaves to recruit the disaffected to fundamentalist causes that reinforce difference and reject the idea of integration.
- 1.9 European countries have approached immigration in a variety of ways ranging from attempts at assimilation to tolerant multi-culturalism. France's expectation that immigrants will assimilate and conform to its Enlightenment ideals has been challenged by a disenfranchised Muslim underclass that is far from assimilated. It is now rethinking its immigration policies to be more selective about who enters its borders, which is causing much controversy. Britain has taken the multi-culturalist approach, recognizing the co-existence of a variety of cultures in its midst. Germany, Italy and Spain have regarded immigrants as a temporary phenomenon and are only now starting to realize that these people are a permanent part of their societies that must be accommodated. Denmark and Holland, long proud of their tolerance of other cultures but facing larger numbers and more inter-cultural violence, are instituting stricter immigration tests and policies to force integration, including banning arranged marriages and requiring mandatory language and culture programs for imams.

Muslims in Europe in 2003

	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Population (in millions)</u>
France	8%	5
Netherlands	6	1
Germany	4	3.5
Belgium	4	0.4
Austria	4	0.3
United Kingdom	3	1.6
Sweden	3	0.3
Italy	2	1
Spain	2	1
Bosnia Herzegovina	40	1.5

Source: International Religious Freedom Report 2004,
U.S. Department of State



Overarching Issues

- 1.10 Here we suggest some of the issues that most powerfully influence the discourse and cultural exchange between countries with predominantly Muslim populations and Europe:

Globalization

- 1.11 Technology is facilitating interactions of people and information across geographical and cultural borders at an accelerating pace. The global marketplace – both real and virtual – has made cultural commodities available around the world. The transit of capital, technologies, information and people has widespread implications for both conflict and understanding between cultures.

Religious Fundamentalism

- 1.12 Religious fundamentalism is on the rise globally, and intolerance of secular humanism and modern science is its dangerous companion. It is largely a Christian phenomenon in the U.S., but a Muslim one in Europe and elsewhere. As a result, religious values are having a greater impact on government decision-making and other aspects of contemporary life. Many countries in secular Europe are struggling to find a balance between tolerating religious diversity and assuring that their basic humanistic beliefs and values are sustained.

Government Policies

- 1.13 Negative reactions to American foreign policy, particularly its actions in the Middle East, tend to dominate and polarize international debate, but many foreign and domestic policies of European and Muslim countries also serve to inflame conflict and misunderstanding. Cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq, of course, engenders hostility among many Muslims, but so do European policies that limit immigration, restrict employment opportunities or disrespect cultural and religious codes (such as requiring young Muslim women to forego their religious headgear while attending public schools). Meanwhile, some in the Western world see policies in some Muslim states, such as those that restrict the rights of women or enable the destruction of art, as proof that Islamic and Western values cannot co-exist.

Media

- 1.14 Largely dominated by U.S. media conglomerates, the images and products of popular culture are spread world-wide almost without constraint. News media of all kinds tend to over-simplify and sensationalize events as fear sells more advertising than thoughtful commentary and debate. Both European and Islamic media sources tend to reinforce negative stereotypes of the other. Given the ease with which images can be disseminated and passions inflamed, relatively minor events, such as the Dutch cartoonist's parody of the Koran, can cause an international incident.



- 1.15 Meanwhile, the growth of the Internet and satellite broadcasting have broken down some national barriers and given divergent voices platforms for expression, in some cases creating new transnational alignments and coalitions. Al-Jazeera is an important example. The largest and most unfettered broadcast source in the Arab world, Al-Jazeera is helping develop a pan-Arab consciousness on a global scale. Unfortunately the common ground that many Muslim communities are finding is one of disillusionment, alienation and anger at the West. Promoting more balanced and fair representations of Muslims in European media, and of Europeans in Islamic media, is an important part of improving inter-cultural understanding and exchange.

Pop Culture

- 1.16 Western popular culture, developed and distributed by powerful multi-national corporations, is seen by many as a hegemonic, and negative force. Officially, Muslim countries express widespread revulsion at the ubiquitous images of scantily clad pop icons, the lyrics of popular music, and the gratuitous violence of films and TV programs produced in the West. At the same time, popular culture is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities for combating fundamentalism and bridging the cultural divide between Muslim and Western cultures. Within some of the more repressive Muslim countries, pop music has become a form of resistance by the youth. The global market for hip-hop has led to a proliferation of the art across the globe. While the styles have local flavor and the words speak of culturally specific experiences, a common musical language results in voracious consumption of hip-hop by youth across the world regardless of where it originates. In some countries where freedom of expression is sharply curtailed by fundamentalist regimes, both hip-hop and other kinds of artists have been forced to leave in order to pursue their art. This has led to exile communities of artists in Western communities who are still very connected to and popular in their home countries.

Cultural Context of Art

- 1.17 In both Europe and the Muslim world, definitions of art are contested. In Europe, the struggle is between “high” and “popular” culture, “traditional” and “contemporary” art, “authentic” and “commercial” orientation, but the place of art in the secular society is firm. The Muslim world takes a historically divergent view of the value, place and importance of art and humanistic scholarship. In the past, when the majority of art made in Muslim societies was created in the context of courtly patronage or religious decoration, the relationship of spiritual themes to aesthetics was direct. Contemporary Islamic art, however, is more difficult to define, and labeling an artwork “Islamic art” because its creator is Muslim or comes from a predominantly Muslim country is as misguided as labeling an artwork “Christian art” because its creator hails from a predominantly Christian country.



- 1.18 The most conservative Muslim societies view Western culture as a direct threat to their value system and perceive artistic expression as a subversive display of individualism that is tantamount to political (and by extension) religious rebellion. Artists in these societies have limited options and only artwork which is supportive of, or neutral toward, the reigning regime is seen by the outside world. Even in Muslim states in which the political regimes officially support art and culture, strong religious leaders who take a stand on cultural policy can have an impact on artistic creation, consumption and preservation. The recently declared *fatwa* against sculpture by Egypt's Grand Mufti is an example of this. While it was derided as ridiculous by many Egyptians, some worry that it will lead to the defacing of cultural artifacts by fundamentalists. The more liberal Muslim states and Muslim communities in Europe do support and present the work of artists and scholars, including filmmakers, writers, musicians and theater artists.
- 1.19 Given the complexity of art's place in Muslim society, many believe that priority should be given to projects that link artistic practice with scholarship, where the presentation of artwork is complemented by informed interpretation and contextualization. The growing presence of Muslims and Muslim artists in Europe is an important asset for cultural exchange. Recognizing and building on the networks of cultural presentation and preservation in immigrant communities is essential to effective and successful cultural programming.

Reciprocity and Length of Engagements

- 1.20 To promote deep cultural understanding, one-time exchanges across borders are not sufficient. They can even be problematic if they are (or are perceived to be) a form of cultural imperialism in which "exotic" foreign cultures are brought to Europe for overtly political or commercial purposes. In the "flat world" that journalist Thomas Friedman describes, we have heightened awareness of cultural differences, and anxiety about potential miscommunication and misunderstanding. To understand different values and world views requires sincere, open-minded and sustained engagement with other people and their cultures and a genuine reciprocity that prevents one side from dominating the discourse.

Logistical Challenges

- 1.21 The lack of information, the scarcity of effective intermediary organizations, language barriers, and political constraints present significant logistical challenges to those seeking to expand and cultural exchange between Europe and the Muslim world.
- *Information* – There is no centralized source of information or resources for international cultural exchange, nor any entity whose job it is to promote inter-cultural understanding between the Muslim world and the European Union. Exchange that does occur, therefore, takes place on an ad hoc basis and largely through the initiative of individual cultural or educational organizations, or artists themselves. Muslim artists or cultural leaders wishing to travel to Europe, for example, have difficulty penetrating the European cultural system and have no source of comprehensive and reliable information about who to contact or how to develop exchange projects. Europeans



wishing to travel in Muslim countries or explore inter-cultural projects have difficulty comprehending and penetrating the local cultural systems, finding appropriate partners, and building meaningful partnerships.

- *Intermediaries* – Most European countries maintain embassies in Muslim countries (where they are allowed to do so), and vice versa. These organizations offer one entry point for cultural exchange. Quasi-governmental diplomatic entities such as the British Council, Alliance Francaise and Goethe Institut are energetic and valuable agents in promoting international cultural partnerships, and a number of countries – including Germany, France, the U.K. and the Netherlands – support conferences, cultural markets and other mechanisms that promote exchange. However, there are no counterparts in the Muslim world, making it difficult for European cultural groups to identify on-the-ground partners for international work. This may be one of the reasons why most of the efforts to date have been bi-lateral programs, rarely involving sustained exchanges or opportunities for artists or cultural material to travel to multiple venues and countries.
- *Language, politics, money* – Even when other logistical challenges are overcome, language is a significant barrier. Presenting artists in proper cultural context when they do not speak or understand the native language is difficult. Getting the presentation format right and educating the audience effectively are important, and sometimes costly, considerations. Compounding this are political barriers that some European countries have erected in the wake of terrorist activity, restricting travel by foreign artists to and within European borders. The effects of these new policies include diplomatic problems (artists denied entry), administrative hassles (an increase in bureaucratic paperwork), and increased costs (for expediting visas and other related expenses). The lack of financial support for this work is also a constraint. Because European foundations do not report on their financial outlays to the government, it is difficult to determine the philanthropic investment in international exchange, but a brief scan of the European Foundation Center's data suggests that this is not a priority for the foundation sector.



The Need for Future Investment

- 1.22 In spite of its inherent challenges and the difficulties facing those interested in promoting cultural exchange between Europe and the Muslim world, the need for investment in this work has rarely been greater. In a global society splintered by parochial interests, art has an important role to play in mediating the images and information that are communicated across national and cultural boundaries. Art is not the panacea for global understanding, but it is one means by which to foster dialogue and understanding between individuals, communities, religions and nation-states. International travel and interactions with other artists and audiences stimulate artists' imaginations and the range of ideas and references from which they can draw. It also connects immigrant artists and ethnic communities with their cultural history, making them less isolated and disaffected and increasing the flow of new ideas across borders. The variety of artmaking and cultural expression originating in both European and Muslim countries offer a window into the richness and diversity of both worlds, which can help to dispel the stereotypes and intolerance that breeds extremism.
- 1.23 Some strategies that would promote and expand meaningful cultural exchange include:

Networks and Information Exchange

- Establish an online information clearinghouse on international exchange for artists and cultural organizations, including information on effective techniques, key players, financial resources, etc.
- Strengthen international networks for museums, performing arts presenters, universities, and other cultural venues through conferences, training and information exchange and funding mechanisms.
- Stimulate foundation giving and public investment in international cultural exchange through conferences, research, joint ventures, and other means.
- Encourage strong networks between immigrants and their countries of origin, meanwhile building mechanisms to expose immigrants and native Europeans to each others' cultural products.

Media

- Promote more positive images of Muslims in the European media and of Europeans in the Muslim media by supporting journalists' exchanges, more thoughtful commentary and analysis, new documentaries and feature films that portray "the other" more fairly, etc.
- Broadly publicize and promote successful cultural exchanges and the benefits they engender.

Policy

- Create an international Policy Forum to study and redress the broad-reaching negative cultural impacts of various European policies on immigration, education, and employment.



- Advocate for greater financial commitments to cultural exchange by governments in Europe and the Muslim world.

Funding

- Recognize and support the cultural, community and educational institutions in Europe and Muslim countries that are committed to international exchange, enabling them to conduct programs and share best practices with others.
- Develop funding programs that will support travel by artists, scholars, cultural institution leaders and others in a position to promote cultural exchange.
- Develop funding programs that underwrite program costs, scholarship, commissioning of new work and other expenses involved in cultural exchange.

