



Policy Brief

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Islam and the EU: the merits and risks of Inter-Cultural Dialogue

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Background

'Inter-Cultural Dialogue' (ICD) has become a fashionable term in the post 9/11 era and, increasingly, a flagship of the EU's fight against terrorism and radicalisation and its attempt to establish a positive relationship with Islam, inside and outside the Union's borders.

In December 2006, the Council and European Parliament adopted a Decision on ICD and, in May 2007, the European Commission launched the first-ever European Strategy for Culture, with the aim of promoting awareness of cultural diversity and EU values, dialogue with civil society and exchanges of good practice.

However, little is known about the origin of the term ICD, its real meaning and its objectives. It is also unclear how useful it really is, and whether it is a concept or a practice – or, rather, how to derive the latter from the former.

The expression itself is not new. For experts and practitioners in the field of culture and communications, it is about inter-personal communication,

mutual exchange and inclination to listen.

From Huntington to 9/11

The spread of the term in European and international circles dates back to at least the early 1990s. In 1993, Samuel Huntington published an article in *Foreign Affairs* developing the argument – still rooted in a Cold War perspective of a world divided into blocs – that future conflicts would take place at the fault lines between "civilisations" (characterised by different religious affiliations) – and that one of the fiercest of these would be between the West and the Muslim world.

The aim of ICD is to move away from and counter this polarised world view. With its emphasis on moving beyond narrow views and fundamentalism through positive dialogue between different cultures, it can be seen as a direct response to the notion of a "clash of civilisations".

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership launched by the EU in 1995 included

a 'third basket' devoted to cultural and civil society exchanges across the region, and the Barcelona Declaration refers explicitly to the need to promote dialogue among peoples of all religions in the Mediterranean.

Thanks to the personal engagement of former Commission President Jacques Delors and his successors, informal consultations have been taking place between EU officials and the various churches, religions and schools of thought in Europe since the 1980s.

In 1998, the then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami proposed establishing a year devoted to the "Dialogue of Civilisations" at the United Nations. This idea was taken up enthusiastically by the international community, but things did not go quite as planned: 2001 opened with the launch of this initiative and ended up in the grip of the US-led war on terror following the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by terrorists claiming legitimacy from Islam.

In the wake of the attacks, initiatives in the field of ICD intensified in a number of national and international arenas, including the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the OSCE. However, in the changed climate, a new security dimension was added to these projects, thus partially altering the purpose of ICD.

The idea of ICD nevertheless gained strong currency, particularly within the EU, with various initiatives launched both to foster exchanges with Muslim groups across Europe and to discuss the broader scope of ICD beyond institutional relations with religious groups.

Two major opportunities were provided, in December 2001 and March 2002 under the auspices of the Prodi Commission, for religious leaders, intellectuals and practitioners in the cultural sector to offer EU policy-makers their reflections on ICD. During the 2003 Italian Presidency, EU Interior Ministers agreed a Declaration which recognised the contribution of 'faith communities' to social cohesion. The ill-fated Constitution signed in 2004 also contained a commitment to 'maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue' between EU institutions and religious and other organisations, whilst acknowledging that legal provisions regulating church-state

relations remained the exclusive competence of Member States.

The Barroso Commission organised a meeting with religious leaders advocating peace in the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings in London which provided a vehicle for resuming dialogue between the EU and faith groups. These exchanges have continued ever since (with two major EU conferences on interfaith dialogue in 2005 and 2006); interest in Islam has increased in different corners, and efforts have been made to develop ICD initiatives on a range of fronts. In this context, Commission Vice-President Franco Frattini's role has also become more prominent.

State of play

Vagueness persists, however, about the purpose and implications of ICD: where does it start and end? Which actors are involved? Is culture a channel or the object of dialogue? If secular institutions do not 'do religion', how can they engage in 'interfaith' work through ICD?

Despite this, many EU policy-makers now see ICD as the magic formula to engage with Muslim communities within and beyond Europe, with four main factors driving this interest in ICD and Islam.

Internally, there is concern about the implications of the growing number of Muslims in Europe for the future of its social, cultural, economic, legal and political fabric. This is linked to concerns about the integration of those who have immigrant status (legal or illegal) as well as those who have European citizenship but seem 'disconnected' from European life, turned towards their countries of origin or focused on traditions that isolate them from the societies in which they live.

On the external front, the EU's approach towards countries with a predominantly Muslim population is sometimes unclear. In particular, it is caught in a dilemma over whether – and to what extent – it should engage in political dialogue with 'Islamist' political actors; i.e. those who define their values and goals in relation to Islam.

Turkey's bid for EU membership also poses a number of questions about the impact this might have on Europe's 'identity' and, possibly, the role of religion in the public sphere. The recent tensions inside Turkey over secularism have only strengthened European concerns in this respect.

Finally, the various attacks carried out across the world by terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam have created a general atmosphere of suspicion towards Muslims, particularly over the last six years.

EU Member States are determined to promote social cohesion and

prevent discrimination, including against Muslims. However, they also face the concrete challenge of finding appropriate measures to prevent radicalisation and fight new forms of terrorism that threaten the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, distort perceptions of Islam and prejudice the normal daily interaction of Muslims with the world around them.

This has led to controversial attempts to support 'moderate' Muslim groups and 'mainstream' the representation of Islam in the European public sphere through the creation, at national level, of advisory representative Islamic institutions. This risks forcing individuals into artificial categories and creating rivalries between Islamic traditions and communities.

The two-pronged violence – in actions and rhetoric – of the so-called 'Islamist' terrorists poses a double threat to European society: physical attacks and attacks on its values. The climate of fear this has created tends to generate negative stereotypes, exclusively

security-oriented responses, and mistrust between Europe's Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

The EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy, launched by the Council in 2005 takes a comprehensive approach to meeting a series of interconnected challenges, and has four dimensions: prevention, protection, pursuit and response.

It commits the Union to combat terrorism globally while respecting human rights and enabling its citizens to live in an area of freedom, security and justice. In external relations, it includes EU aid projects for third countries in the field of good governance and the rule of law to address factors which can contribute to radicalisation and recruitment. It also includes expert meetings with the Euro-Med and Asian countries to analyse and compare radicalisation processes in the Mediterranean area.

ICD can only play a useful role in this global EU strategy focused on both 'human' and more traditional security objectives if it is aimed at enhancing equal opportunities, political participation and trust between citizens, immigrants and institutions.

What's in a term – and what's not

The term 'Inter-Cultural Dialogue' can be used to describe an overarching framework that brings together – and balances – all these concerns and different priorities. It provides a viable political tool to wield a form of soft power both domestically and internationally. Yet it can also be an empty and deceptive notion if its components and purposes are not fully spelt out and correctly understood.

The concept has, for example, been criticised for its 'fuzziness', which contributes to the impression that it might be used as a way to avoid addressing 'real issues' such as European policy towards the Middle East or jobs, education, and social

security at the domestic level. In many people's minds, the term ICD is also automatically associated with the idea of 'interfaith dialogue', a sphere of activity which is normally left to individuals and/or religious groups rather than secular institutions.

Clarifying that ICD is about dialogue between and within cultures in a broader sense prompts a second, intellectual challenge: what is 'culture'? To what extent is ICD linked with notions of 'civilisation', 'religion', 'nationality', and political and ethical 'values'? Does it imply any reference to the Western 'civilising mission' of the past and hegemonic power over language, culture, finance and politics? And, in an EU where internal mobility is increasing, with the consequent intermingling of traditions, identities, and lifestyles, is it an attempt to formulate the essence of 'European citizenship' another vague term?

ICD positions itself as an alternative to 'multiculturalism' (the idea of a pluralistic society where different cultures remain separate and self-contained) and confirms the EU concept of 'unity in diversity'. The reference to 'dialogue' evokes ideas of peace and solidarity, which are among the EU's founding values: 'dialogue' replaces the Huntingtonian 'clash' and the stiff notion of 'civilisation' is supplanted by the more subtle 'culture'. To make the link stronger, the two concepts are held together by the prefix 'inter' (which highlights the connection) rather than opting for the term 'multi' (which indicates multiplicity, without any reference to the interconnection between the different parts).

In the context of the difficulties still hampering the formulation of a common EU policy towards the broader Middle East, the rhetoric of ICD is perhaps a cohesive element that can hold European policy-makers together. In foreign policy, it enables them to project a 'single voice', promoting dialogue

and distancing the EU from the use of force. Domestically, it averts a deterioration of the situation and possible retaliatory acts against Muslims.

As a consequence, what was initially seen as a recipe for promoting social cohesion has *de facto* become a synonym for the 'integration' of those immigrant and minority communities in Europe perceived to be problematic; i.e. Muslims. Many observers have even associated the ICD concept with a process of 'institutionalisation' of Islam that, in fact, has little or nothing to do with the spontaneity and multi-dimensionality of the idea of intercultural relations between peoples, communities and faiths.

The added value of the EU (as distinct from other international organisations) championing ICD stems from its ability to ensure that the concept permeates societal and international relations at various levels. And whatever its limits, the EU is respected by its partners as an international actor because of the perception that it is ready to listen to them and willing to engage in dialogue.

However, while the EU institutions and several Member States have fully embraced ICD, other countries (both in Europe and at the UN) have engaged in parallel enterprises which appear to privilege the term 'civilisation' over 'culture'. In 2005, Spain and Turkey launched the UN's 'Alliance of Civilisations' initiative, explicitly to "try to tackle fear and suspicion, bridge divides and overcome prejudices and polarisations *between Islam and the West*"; in 2006, Denmark presented a distinct 'Co-existence of Civilizations' project.

Finally, the ICD 'card' is also often played by international bodies set up by Muslim countries such as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) which tend to claim sovereignty and speak on behalf of all Muslims, including those living in the West.

Prospects

The EU has no competence for religious affairs, let alone Islam. However, its activities have had an indirect impact on the situation of Muslim communities in Europe, in particular through:

- immigration/integration policies;
- employment and social cohesion policies;
- external relations with Muslim countries; and
- responses to internal and external security challenges.

In the wake of 9/11 – and especially as a consequence of the bombings in Madrid and London, also carried out by terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam – dealing with Islam has become a top priority for the EU. The German Presidency has pushed the issue even higher up the agenda, in particular by trying to develop ways to ‘institutionalise’ Islam in Europe.

The assumption behind this strategy – already adopted by a number of EU countries – is that giving Muslims the possibility to channel their claims through a legitimate body would diminish the chances of extremist groups exploiting Muslim concerns, anger and frustrations.

The idea of creating a public space for Islam in a European context – and in a political system that is secular but highly influenced by a long history of Christianity – is legitimate *per se*. However, combining this with the notion of ICD may prove misleading.

We do not yet know the forthcoming Portuguese Presidency’s plans in relation to Islam. However, it seems likely that concerns about

the political participation of Muslims at the local and national level will be emphasised and perhaps prevail over the discourse on institutionalising Islam.

What’s to be done – and what’s not

ICD can be useful, but is not a panacea. It has meaning and effect only if it does not remain a dry formula, and is accompanied by a number of practical initiatives (especially in the social sector) which are not just specifically focused on Islam or on cultural events

Indeed, concentrating solely on Muslims could pose a double risk: that Muslims may become even more isolated if they are singled out all the time for exclusive projects; and that the overall social fabric could be damaged if other minority and non-Muslim communities are not involved. It is also important to avoid ICD becoming a sterile public relations exercise.

The EU has reinterpreted the concept in an original way and needs to be faithful to this interpretation to bring about change and promote trust between individuals and communities as well as institutions.

If the Union wants to develop strategies for a productive interaction with Europe’s Muslim population, it should engage first and foremost with the variety of voices and institutions of those who are European citizens. It is a basic principle of international law that the rights and duties of citizens are domestic issues,

rather than foreign policy questions, and should be regulated by sovereign European states and EU institutions.

However, given that a sizeable proportion of Muslims living in Europe are still citizens of Muslim countries and given that the EU has bilateral relations with these countries, communication with them and with such institutions as the OIC should not be neglected either.

Multilevel dialogue with all groups of Muslims living in Europe should be encouraged.

Hence, the creation of formal Muslim institutions, sponsored by EU governments seeking to bring together all these voices and channel their concerns and claims more effectively, should not be considered the ‘only’ way forward. They are only welcome if it is made clear that these are not ‘representative’ bodies but just ‘tentative’ forms of consultation.

Furthermore, any attempt to organise these initiatives around the idea of promoting ‘moderate’ Islam should be avoided. This would risk deepening existing divisions between different versions of Islam, and creating artificial forms of leadership and hierarchies that do not exist in the tradition and history of Islam.

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