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Intercultural Dialogue and the Emerging Mediterranean: Realigning the Anna Lindh Foundation Strategy

Paul Walton¹

What has been described as the most important event in the 21st century so far emerged from the Arab street- from Sidi Bouzid to Cairo, Misrata and Homs- where millions of people from diverse social and political backgrounds assembled in public squares and local neighbourhoods at the start of 2011 ready to stake a claim to their future. Many of them were young citizens who had taken inspiration as peers in Tunisia led an extraordinary uprising, exchanging ideas online about everything from tactics for civic mobilisation to tear-gas evasion. ‘Dignity, freedom and democracy’ were words now written in Arabic, displayed on hand-made banners and Facebook walls, and constituting the manifesto of an unprecedented social and political movement emerging across the region.

Watching the rapidly unfolding events from the Anna Lindh Foundation headquarters in Alexandria was an opportunity to experience first-hand the creativity and courage of the people at the forefront of this uprising, and to bear witness to a unique moment in history.

The first and immediate response of the Foundation to the new situation inevitably focused on staff safety, with the removal of

¹ Paul Walton heads the Executive Office and Communications at the headquarters of the Anna Lindh Foundation, and is Chair of the Board of Directors of the British International School of Alexandria. The views expressed by the author in this article do not necessarily reflect the opinion of any institution.

police from the streets and the introduction of curfew in Egypt on 28th January. Yet as our day-to-day management went on, we were beginning to recognise the full significance of the moment. At first, trying to draw comparisons to what we were seeing (was this ‘Arab’ 89?), then quickly realising that what was happening could constitute a milestone in the contemporary story of the Arab world. Much more than a series of revolts communicated and connected by online media, but rather a moment deeply rooted in the social and cultural transformations which had been taking in the Arab societies during the last decades.

At the same time, there were important questions to consider at the level of the institution: How do we respond as an organisation to the changes? If we need to adapt, in which way and to what extent? How do we balance the short-term and long-term perspective? And how could we concretely make the bridge between our programme for intercultural dialogue and the social agenda of Tahrir Square?

We were not alone in this process of reassessment. All the major players in the Mediterranean space, from the European Union and the Arab League to regional networks, cultural bodies and NGOs, were facing the same question and challenge of adaptation. For the Anna Lindh Foundation, as a young institution rooted in the region’s civil societies,² there was a sense that this was a unique moment to assume a central role in the changing landscape; the key question was in which way?

² The Anna Lindh Foundation was launched in 2005 as the first common institution of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, with a mandate to bring people together from across the Mediterranean to improve mutual respect between cultures and to support civil society working for a common future in the region.

I. A Shift in Vision

What was fascinating to observe during those initial weeks of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, was the manner in which they were taking place, the nature and language of its main players. In a relatively short period of time, some of the most widely established stereotypes regarding the Western vision of the Mediterranean had been challenged, and the traditional vision of Arab societies questioned. The focus of media analysis suddenly appeared to be shifting from mosques to public spaces, from the veil to women, and from what was supposedly Arab to the Arabs themselves.³ At the same time, the traditional view of Euro-Arab relations, based on religious identity or the pre-eminence of the Middle East conflict, looked to be giving way to a renewed interest in the social and cultural transformations in Arab societies.

During the first decade of the 21st century, dialogue between Western and Arab societies was seriously affected by distorted and biased perceptions. Following the attacks of 11th September 2001, the ‘clash of civilizations’ doctrine⁴ was elevated to the centre of the public debate and the international media spotlight. Many believed that Al Qaeda terrorism proved the Samuel Huntington school of thought right: Islam was homogenous and the people in the Arab lands did not hunger for pluralism and democracy in the way these things are understood in the West. Almost overnight, the consequences of 11th September transformed the Arab into the contemporary bogeyman, ‘with the Arabs replacing the Soviets of the Cold War era as the prototypical Hollywood villain’,

³ Media Tenor Limited, 2011: “Changing Media Landscape”, Report presented at the Arab-West Media Forum held at the headquarters of the League of Arab States, 6 April.

⁴ The Clash of Civilizations theory, proposed by political scientist Samuel Huntington, was originally formulated in a 1992 lecture at the American Enterprise Institute, which was later developed into a 1993 Foreign Affairs article titled ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, in response to Fukuyama, Francis, 1992: *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books).

ushering in a decade characterized by cross-cultural divide and increasing mistrust.

The challenge of bridging this gap in mutual perceptions intensified over the subsequent years in the wake of political events and consequences which marred the Mediterranean landscape, from the invasion of Iraq to the Israel-Hezbollah War and the stagnation of the Middle East Peace Process. Furthermore, the consolidation of global media and television networks contributed to the media playing an increasing role in molding perceptions and building parallel narratives about some of the most important events across the region, with conflicts often set in different ways and influenced by different political agendas. The ‘Danish Cartoon Crisis’⁵ and the shockwaves sent round the globe by violent mass demonstrations in the Muslim World in early 2006, served as a dramatic wake-up call to the deep crisis of cultural relations across the two shores of the Mediterranean.

And yet, a decade after 11th September, people in the West were realising that the ‘other’ was not so different: they chat on Facebook and they call for social justice, economic opportunities and a government which serves them. Indeed, the people of Alexandria, Egypt and the wider region were finding themselves at a defining moment which had ‘little to do with the grand schemes of the clash of civilizations, and far more with grass-root issues’⁶: the difference between the democratic aspirations of the people, among the highest in the world, and their experience of weak democratic practices; the mismatch between the economic

⁵ The Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy began after 12 editorial cartoons, most of which depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad, were published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten on 30 September 2005.

⁶ The quote is from the article by Keppel, Gilles (2011, March 11). Beyond the Clash of Civilizations. *The New York Times*. Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com>, and the subsequent listed issues are based on the presentation of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies at the Arab-West Media Forum 2011.

growth in the Arab countries and the poverty rate of the population, the majority of whom had not benefited from this growth; the disappointment towards social services that one would have expected to be a priority of the State in countries with limited freedom.

While areas of the Western media narrative appeared to be opening up to the diverse issues and voices of the Arab street, a shift in perspective was also evident at the political level, with different governments and regional institutions looking to adjust their policies in an effort to give an immediate response to the new situation.

In the case of the European Union (EU), this shift also meant recognising and coming to terms with the weaknesses of its previous policies towards the Southern Mediterranean region. “Europe was not vocal enough about defending human rights and local democratic forces,” stated Štefan Füle, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, in his policy speech to the European Parliament at the end of February 2011. “Too many of us fell prey to the assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region. This was not even Realpolitik. It was, at best, short-termism – and the kind of short-termism that makes the long-term ever more difficult to build.”⁷

The established balancing act of the EU in terms of ‘values’ (democracy, freedom, human rights) and ‘interests’ (stability and security) had also been affected in the wake of September 11. The

⁷ Policy speech of Stefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy to the North Africa Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), European Parliament Brussels, 28th February 2011.

‘President Mubarak speech’⁸ that external powers must choose between him and radical Islamic instability was taken up by other leaders in the Middle East and North Africa, and fed into the wider clash of civilizations and war on terror perceptions stoked in Europe by those governments competing with populist parties opposed to Islamic immigrants. As a result, the EU often chose to subjugate concerns for human rights and democracy to the fear of terrorism, with a number of Member States finding reasons – whether linked to commercial contracts or the fear of destabilizing a secular regime – to dissuade the EU from applying conditionality to its aid to North African countries.⁹ The historic events in the Arab region now obliged the European Union to rapidly rethink its approach to the region.

On 8th March, the EU issued its communication ‘A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean’,¹⁰ reinforced in May by the launch of the ‘new and ambitious European Neighbourhood Policy’ (ENP). Not only did the communication and upgraded policy mechanism outline increased support for democratic transformation in the Arab region, but it also indicated a major shift in policy to a more inclusive political dialogue, moving the focus from relationships with the authorities to relationships with civil society. This new focus on civil society, a policy equally assumed by other international institutions operating in the region¹¹, was of

⁸ Referenced in the article by Gillespie, Paul (2011, February 5). Change poses identity crisis for Middle East. *Irish Times*. Available at:

<http://www.irishtimes.com>. Paul Gillespie is a member of the European Neighbourhood Journalism Network and lecturer at University College Dublin.

⁹ Referenced in the policy brief by Grant, Charles (2011, March 11). A new neighbourhood policy for the EU. *Policy Brief*, Centre for European Reform. Available at: www.cer.org.uk.

¹⁰ European Commission, 2011: *A Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean Countries*, COM (2011) 200 final, Communication of the European Commission, 8 March.

¹¹ See the Council of Europe and the Arab Spring Report; the Conclusions of the League of Arab States’ ‘Arab-West Media Forum’; UNESCO’s ‘Democracy and

enormous relevance to the work of the Anna Lindh Foundation.

II. Building on Common Values

Due to its particular nature and structure, the Foundation was well-prepared to anticipate the social transformations taking place in the Arab societies and, as a consequence, suitably positioned to adapt its programme to the emerging Mediterranean landscape.

The forefathers of the Anna Lindh Foundation (the 2003 High Level Group on Intercultural Dialogue convened by then President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi) had anticipated the centrality of civil society in building cultural relations between people on the two shores of the Mediterranean. The Group defined intercultural dialogue not as an abstract meeting of ‘cultures’, but as a process of social change between human beings and individuals with complex identities and different needs and expectations. ‘To be effective’, the 2003 Report stated, ‘Intercultural dialogue must be set within a context of respect for fundamental rights, and may then also become a powerful vehicle of democratization’.¹²

The approach established by the High Level Group was key in defining the specific personality of the Anna Lindh Foundation, an intergovernmental creation to be rooted in the region’s civil societies, and the Group Report presented a roadmap for the Foundation’s programme. Following its launch two years later, the new institution set about building its ‘Network of National Civil

Renewal in the Arab World’; the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations’; ‘Cairo Policy Dialogues on Democracy’.

¹² President Prodi’s initiative (creating the High Level Group, denominated ‘Groupe des Sages’, in the context of defining a neighbourhood policy) followed on from the Barcelona Process, with the primary aim to ‘recast the cultural element’ (download the High Level Report on ‘Dialogue Between People and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area’). Available at: www.euromedalex.org.

Society Networks' across each of the Euro-Mediterranean countries, a process which brought together many hundreds of NGOs, social institutions and educational bodies, all of whom shared the values of the Foundation.

This process was by no means straightforward to implement. From one perspective, the initial 'top-down' construction of the Networks, with national coordinators nominated by the relevant Euro-Med government, was in some cases an obstacle to the Foundation's capacity to engage with a wide range of grass-root actors. There were also various challenges to confront related to the participation of civil society based in the Southern Mediterranean, the most significant of which included the difficulties related to the legal registration and recognition of NGOs, controls concerning foreign financing, and restrictions to cross-border mobility from the South to the North. Nevertheless, the Network grew and diversified, involving more than 3000 organisations by January 2011 and forming the backbone of the Foundation's work in terms of facilitating partnerships between social leaders and funding common projects¹³.

It was the same civil society, in the Southern and Eastern countries of the Mediterranean but also in Europe, who demonstrated a strong resilience not to accept the logic of the status quo and the cultural divide in the face of the consequences of the global economic crisis and the 2009 Gaza War. Even while the Union for the Mediterranean was in complete political deadlock, hamstrung by the Arab-Israeli conflict and weakened by bureaucratic arguments, the Foundation and its Network continued to work: bringing people together, facilitating exchanges and calling for those changes at the institutional level which could

¹³ During its first two operational phases, 28,535 civil society leaders were involved in Anna Lindh Foundation activities and 416 intercultural projects were funded with Anna Lindh grants. The Anna Lindh Review 2005 to 2011 is available at: www.annalindhreview.org.

enable the further empowerment and mobility of civil society actors working for intercultural dialogue.

While the Network proved to be a powerful tool to measure the pulse of the situation on the ground, the Anna Lindh Foundation was also well-positioned to anticipate the social changes in the region as a result of its monitoring work on cross-cultural trends and values.

In September 2010, three months prior to the revolutionary events in Tunisia, the Foundation published its first 'Report on Euro-Mediterranean Intercultural Trends'.¹⁴ Based on a Gallup Survey involving more than 13,000 people in 13 Euro-Med countries, the Report was in itself an exercise in democracy, setting out to put the region's citizens at the heart of a debate which had, for too long, been dominated by a minority of voices. Through combining the public opinion survey with the analysis of a regional network experts on cross-cultural issues, the Report also responded to one of the original concepts of the High-Level Advisory Group: that in order to be effective, any dialogue project must be built on an understanding of the deep transformations in our societies, and the examination of their impact on behaviours, values and perceptions.

Among its main findings, the Anna Lindh Report revealed the extent to which people living in societies in Europe and in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region are suffering from a distorted and stereotyped perception of each other, while demonstrating a convergence of values and aspirations among people of the region. The survey and analysis showed that some

¹⁴ Anna Lindh Foundation (Eds.), 2011: *EuroMed Intercultural Trends 2010: The Anna Lindh Report*, the first Report on Intercultural Trends, Brussels, 15 September. Available at: www.annalindhreport.org.

basic values such as ‘family solidarity’¹⁵, ‘hospitality’, ‘interest to provide opportunities to the young generations’, are equally important among the people of the region. The majority of citizens surveyed also expressed their support for a common future among the Euro-Mediterranean countries which could bring, with more reciprocity and co-ownership, concrete advantages to their lives. Such benefits included enhanced dynamism for the young generations, appreciation and respect for other cultures, increased innovation and entrepreneurship as a basis for development, as well as social solidarity.

Another significant trend highlighted in the Report related to the demographic factor in the evolution of intercultural relations. Demography had been the touchstone of the Samuel Huntington thesis, with population growth and the youth bulge in Muslim countries apparently providing ‘recruits for fundamentalism, terrorism, insurgency and migration’. The paradox was that during a decade in which the Huntington paradigm had been greatly promoted and rejoiced, rapprochement between the two shores of the Mediterranean had never before been so strong, carried out by a ground swell of demographic convergence¹⁶. In particular, the increase in the education of the young generations and the drop in the fertility rate over the previous thirty years on the southern Mediterranean shore contributed to the rise of renewed needs and goals, especially among young people. This convergence of values and aspirations was now reinforced by the daily images of millions of people across the region calling for change and chanting slogans of dignity, freedom and respect; not only did it weaken any notion of a clash of civilizations, but it also provided a

¹⁵ ‘Family solidarity’ is considered a “bridging value”, with more than half of the Europeans surveyed identifying family solidarity as the most important value when bringing up their children, while people in the Southern and Eastern shore of the Mediterranean selecting family solidarity as the second most important value after religion.

¹⁶ Reference from: Courbage, Youssef, 2011: “The Cultural Impact of the Demographic Factor”, in: Anna Lindh Foundation, 2011, art.cit.

firm basis on which to build a renewed strategy for trans-Mediterranean cooperation in the emerging regional context.

III. New and Emerging Demands

In March 2011, the Anna Lindh Foundation presented a first proposal of adaptation to its Board of Governors, a political body comprised of the 43 Ambassadors and Senior Officials of the Union for the Mediterranean, with the participation of the EU and the Arab League. The proposal, which had been debated and refined during the previous weeks with the Foundation's Heads of National Networks, introduced several actions to the 2011 Work Plan, the most significant of which was the 'Tunis Exchange Forum on building democratic and pluralistic societies'.

The idea of a regional exchange gathering, that brought together representatives of the Anna Lindh Arab Networks and counterparts from different parts of Europe and the wider region, was very much in line with the Foundation's usual way of work. Nevertheless, the Tunis Forum provided a number of new possibilities in terms of: targeting and engaging with various grass-root social leaders who were previously outside the scope of the Foundation's Network activity in the Southern Mediterranean region; creating a platform for Networks in the North to share their different experiences of democracy-building and transition; and promoting an Arab perspective and Arab-led debate on how the intercultural agenda could be redefined in the new context¹⁷.

Events in the region had moved on significantly by the time the Tunis Forum took place at the end of June 2011, six months on from the initial wave of revolutions. In the Kingdoms of Jordan

¹⁷ The majority of the 235 participants at the Tunis Forum came from the Anna Lindh Networks in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Mauretania, Palestine, Tunisia and Syria.

and Morocco, processes of constitutional reform had been initiated, while violent crackdowns against anti-government protesters and groups continued in Libya and Syria. In Egypt and Tunisia, countries where regime change had taken place, people were coming to terms with the reality that while revolutions can take a matter of days, building democracy requires much longer. High expectations of the population at large had given way to more moderate assessments, and the spirit of active social participation which characterized the post-revolution period was relenting amidst concerns for daily life and the economic situation¹⁸.

Civil society leaders arriving to the regional forum were only too aware of this reality, and were bringing to the intercultural debates issues related to promoting more sustainable conditions for living and participating in democratic life. For countries like Egypt and Tunisia, the list of requirements for putting in place the building blocks for more democratic societies was extensive: developing spaces and structures for good governance; establishing new political parties and processes; ensuring the transformation from state television to public service broadcasting; educating youth with the knowledge and skills for active social participation. In relation to the practices and models of citizenship, it was here that the exchange between civil society across the two shores of the Mediterranean was arguably of most value. On the one hand, because there were lessons to be learnt from societies in Europe related to transition and democracy-building, and on the other, due to the fact that the challenge of participation, particularly among youth, was as relevant in the North as it was in the South (illustrated by the more recent 'Tahrir-inspired' public gatherings in Madrid and other European cities). In all cases, the

¹⁸ See Jones, Anthony, 2011: "The 1989 Changes in Central and Eastern Europe: Lessons for the Arab Nations?" in this volume, for a comparative analysis on the trends and challenges related to democratic transition in the Southern Mediterranean region.

Arab societies would need to find their own systems and models of democratic practice, a point aptly conveyed by a young Egyptian participant when he stated: “Let us dream differently without being trapped in the past experiences”.

Related to this question of democracy-building was the challenge of cultural diversity and social cohesion: ‘how to ensure a citizenship that unites, not divides’. Historically, the transition to democracy from autocratic environments makes cultural diversity more visible, emerging as a richness which may be part of the social capital of the new governance. At the same time, the management of diversity becomes even more complex and a true test for the broader citizenship concept as societies open up, in particular within a region where religious identities have been exploited for political purpose. In the weeks leading up to the Tunis Forum, the question of diversity consumed the media headlines, as the image of national identity which surged during the Egyptian Revolution gave way to street battles between Muslims and Christians in Cairo’s Imbaba neighbourhood, tensions among different Muslim communities, and emerging fault lines in Tunisia between the secular-minded coasts and the more religious and traditional inland. Added to this, was the polarised discussion on the role of religion in politics, inspired by processes of constitutional reform and the preparation of parliamentary elections. In fighting against each other in the name of their respective historical and religious legitimacy, both the secular trends and the Islamists, in the new democracies, were ‘falling into the historical trap of neglecting the main common issues’ (economic stability, education, the role of the army, etc).¹⁹

¹⁹ Reference from the article by Ramadan, Tariq, 2011: “Egypt: transition to democracy”, in: Anna Lindh Foundation, 2011, art.cit. Tariq Ramadan is Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford and member of the 2003 High Level Group on Intercultural Dialogue.

The issue of religion in politics equally remained one of the most misunderstood aspects of the post-Arab uprisings within areas of the Western media and public discourse, with many still finding difficulty in the compatibility between the religious faith of the majority who participated in these movements and their modern aspirations. It was a reflection not only of the sharp contrast between the importance religion has for the setting of values among people in the South Mediterranean in comparison with Europeans, but also the new political and social challenges related to diversity in Europe. The existence of a rising intolerance against peoples of different beliefs, which was being reinforced in the context of economic crisis and the social depression fuelled by the potential collapse of the welfare state in European nations, was the basis of the Council of Europe's report 'Living Together: Combining diversity and freedom in 21st Century Europe'.²⁰ Published in May 2011, the Report defined the response to the issue of diversity as crucial for the EU and the set of democratic values which constitute the core of the European project, underlining in its conclusions that: 'Who will mobilise people for genuine inclusion, at the grassroots level, if not civil society organisations and initiatives?'

IV. Enlarging the Scope

The Tunis Forum marked an important milestone for the Anna Lindh Foundation. From one perspective, the Forum confirmed the need to broaden the Foundation's scope in terms of firmly associating citizenship, human rights and pluralism to its intercultural dialogue mission. From the other, it signaled a certain shift in the programme orientation of the Foundation and its Network towards the Southern Mediterranean region.

²⁰ Council of Europe, 2011: *Living together: Combining diversity and freedom in 21st century Europe, Report of the Group of Eminent Persons of the Council of Europe* (Brussels: Council of Europe). Available at: www.coe.int.

One of the first opportunities to put this new approach into practice came in the form of ‘Young Arab Voices’, an initiative of the ALF and the British Council. Like the Foundation, the British Council had been realigning its Middle East/North Africa strategy in response to the Arab uprisings, and the two institutions recognised the added value in combining networks and tools to address emerging needs at the local and regional level. In April 2011, a joint bid was submitted to the UK government’s newly launched ‘Arab Partnership Fund’²¹, with a focus on increasing young people’s skills and opportunities for debate in Egypt, Tunisia and the wider region. The project, which targeted youth from diverse social and geographical backgrounds, was illustrative of how the Foundation could entwine intercultural activities at the core of its programme (skills for dialogue, regional exchange, youth participation) with the existing social agenda and process of democratisation.

The ‘Young Arab Voices’ initiative also presented a new model for the Anna Lindh Foundation in terms of applying a strategy of ‘géométrie variable’, that-is-to-say acting according to the variety of scenarios and needs coming into view. During its first 6 years, the Foundation’s work had been characterized by its multilateral approach, launching and supporting large-scale activities and programmes open to all the 43 Euro-Mediterranean countries. There was now, more than ever, a clear recognition that the new situations could not be answered with a ‘one size fits all policy’. What it would imply for the Foundation, in operational terms, would be acting in a complementary way at the sub-regional or national level, and in relation to different target groups and needs; it would also mean creating partnerships (as in the case of the British Council) and winning funding from outside agencies

²¹ The ‘Arab Partnership Initiative’ was announced on 8th February 2011 by the British Foreign Secretary as the long-term strategic approach of the UK government to the Arab Spring, available at: www.fco.gov.uk.

that recognised the Foundation's assets as conduits for supporting the process of democratic transition in the Arab region.

The EU recognised the value of this approach, in particular the capacity of the ALF and its Network to play a role in facilitating a new regional dynamic of cooperation between governments and civil societies. On 6th September 2011, EU Commissioner Füle convened a meeting in Brussels with a delegation of the Foundation in order to develop an effective collaboration in the framework of the EU's recently launched policy instruments. For the Commissioner, the priority was clear: maximising the ALF's experience to ensure the new EU approach to civil society served its purpose and responded to the needs on the ground. In practice, the cooperation agreement foresaw joint EU-ALF national and sub-regional projects in the Southern Mediterranean, carried out with the Anna Lindh local Networks and EU Country Delegations. It also recognised the ALF's advocacy role in terms of analyzing the evolution of social transformation in the region (the 'Euro-Med Observatory on Social Change and Cultural Diversity'²²) and reporting back to the EU on the implementation of the National Action Plans.

While this new approach and mandate was key to the Foundation's process of adaptation, particularly in terms of reinforcing its political centrality, visibility and capacity to act in the framework of EU Neighbourhood Policy, it was essential not to lose the regional perspective.

The 'Euro-Mediterranean' dimension represented the Foundation's uniqueness and market edge, distinguishing the

²² The 'Strategy and programme guidelines' presented by the ALF Executive Director to the Board of Governors on 15th September 2011, included a proposal to upgrade the Anna Lindh Report on Intercultural Trends to a permanent observatory on social change and cultural diversity in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

institution from other regional actors and conveying added significance to all of its activities. In the evolving political landscape, the capacity to create spaces of dialogue across cultural borders could be more vital than ever: mobilising European civil society in response to the social consequences of the global economic crisis, for instance, or bringing together Palestinian and Israeli youth in the context of a ‘new process for Middle East peace’.²³ Improving perceptions and deconstructing stereotypes equally remained essential to the prospect of a sustainable political dialogue in the region and, as a consequence, at the heart of the Foundation’s new programme. In particular, strengthening support for the development of intercultural skills, which took into account the growth of mutual influences and interrelations between people and societies in a more open regional context.

At the same time, the perspective of a partnership or union of peoples across the two shores of the Mediterranean was the engine of the Anna Lindh Foundation’s daily work. It was not just a diplomatic affair, but the best roadmap for bridging politically and socially the two Mediterranean shores, and for long-term stability and peace in the region; a common destiny for the societies of the region, beyond identities and beliefs, and based on co-ownership and reciprocity. For this vision to become a reality, it would depend on positive transitions in the Southern Mediterranean, and on the capacity of European societies to respond positively to their cultural diversity. It would also require that the EU and its Mediterranean partner governments effectively addressed all those issues which have undermined and weakened the institutional and ideological aspects of previous attempts of building a Union for the two Mediterranean shores. As President André Azoulay has underlined: “Ensuring that the Partnership is more than just a large

²³ In September 2011, issues related to the Middle East Peace Process were once again making the international headlines following Mahmoud Abbas’ bid submission to the United Nations for recognition of Palestine.

and unbalanced free trade zone, giving it human legitimacy, social justice and acceptable shared rules to face common challenges”.²⁴

The findings of the Anna Lindh Report on Intercultural Trends revealed how the majority of citizens in the region expect a unified entity and shared project around the Mediterranean that can bring their societies positive benefits for the future. Now the Arab revolutions have created new conditions to share with the EU a project based on common values, the result of the extraordinary courage of the men and women who took to the streets at the start of 2011. Against all odds, and in the face of tragic losses, they overturned not only entrenched regimes but also many of the prevailing assumptions that the outside world had about the Arab societies, opening up a historic meeting point across the Mediterranean. Can any of us afford to miss it?

²⁴ André Azoulay is Counselor to the King of Morocco and the first elected President of the Anna Lindh Foundation. The quote is taken from the foreword to the Anna Lindh Report on Intercultural Trends 2010. See Anna Lindh Foundation, 2011, art.cit.