



VOICES FROM ASIA: PROMOTING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO EXTREMISM

MAJLIS EL HASSAN & SASAKAWA PEACE FOUNDATION ROUNDTABLE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE HELSINKI PROCESS ON GLOBALISATION AND DEMOCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

The region of West Asia –North Africa (WANA) has become a focus of attention as the Cold War “front lines” for global security have moved from Europe to this region. There is an urgent need, in the Arab and Muslim worlds, to mobilise coalitions committed to an action plan. Innovative partnerships, at the regional and global levels, are the key to overcoming deadlocks and initiating a viable process for cooperation and security.

Together with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal and his office (Majlis El Hassan) have promoted “Voices from Asia” as a means for dialogue and mutual participation. The Middle East Citizens’ Assembly (MECA), which HRH has personally supported, is inspired by the Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly, which helped bring about an end to the Cold War in Europe. The twenty-first century Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy, facilitated by the governments of Finland and Tanzania, is concerned with the complex relationship between extremism and democratic governance, among other things.

The Amman roundtable, “Promoting Political Participation as an Alternative to Extremism” was sponsored by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, and organised by Majlis El Hassan in partnership with the Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy.

The meeting focussed upon four interrelated issues:

- the root causes of extremism,
- the human dignity deficit,
- creating a process for cooperation and security in WANA,
- and developing MECA.

In discussing these issues, the role of interreligious cooperation in conflict transformation and peace-building as well as a number of specific instruments, such as a Social Charter, an Energy Charter and a Cohesion Fund, were considered.

OPENING SESSION

HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal described that *Promoting Political Participation as an Alternative to Extremism* is, in essence, empowering the marginalised – the title of the meeting could just as well be promoting inclusion as an alternative to exclusion, promoting multilateralism as an alternative to unilateralism. HRH welcomed the possibility of simulating a social and economic process in the West Asia and North Africa. Inclusion, ownership and engagement must occur at the grass roots level, to win the battle. The WANA region is on the brink of serious disaster, and any chance to develop an understanding in the region on politics, economics and human rights, must be seized immediately.

Professor Takeaki Hori called for concrete initiative to help people realise that there are alternatives to current trends, also in the WANA region.

H.E. Mr. Seif Ali Idd stressed the importance of partnership between different stakeholders as crucial to addressing the challenges of globalization and meeting the targets of the Millennium Declaration. People seek respect for their dignity and cultural identity and they, through direct participation in the governance of globalisation. Multilateralism ensures transparency, and provides protection against the asymmetries of power and influence in the international community. In an unstable world, such a system also ensures that bilateral economic conflicts do not automatically translate into bilateral political conflicts. Good governance, with enforcement of human rights and the reassurance that such protections bring to people, will constitute the surest long-run strategy against extremism and terrorism.

The basis for good governance is a well-functioning democratic political system that ensures representative and honest governments responsive to the needs of people. This not only involves the holding of regular, free and fair elections, but also implies the respect for human rights and dignity, as well as basic civil liberties such as freedom of expression and of association, and free and pluralistic media. Every effort should also be made to remove obstacles to the growth of representative organizations of workers and employers, and to fruitful social dialogue between them.

Mr. Folke Sundman delivered Minister Tuomioja's message to the meeting, in which it was emphasised that, although the Western world has increasingly become a source of radicalisation, it is crucially important to examine the root causes, manifestations and consequences of extremism in the WANA region. Many of the root causes of radicalisation, and possibly the key to tackling them, lie in disempowerment, both economic and political, which is further exacerbated by an increasing sense of alienation. It is important to combat totalitarian terrorism by means of constitutional democracy. Counter-terrorism activity must be based on a realistic legislative framework, accounting for human rights and seeking engagement and dialogue with the marginalised.

A parallel has often been drawn between the first Helsinki Process of the 1970s and this 21st century Helsinki Process. The first Helsinki Process was able to make a substantial contribution to building peace in a deeply polarized world, in which an atmosphere of deep hostility and mistrust prevailed. The realization that the security of states also depends on the security of the individuals within them was innovative in the European notion of security and effectively granted human rights the same status as other fundamental principles of peace and security, such as the sovereign equality and territorial integrity of states. Perhaps the second Helsinki Process could help in initiating a similar process in the West Asia - North Africa region.

SESSION 1: EXTREMISM – ROOT CAUSES, MANIFESTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

Vatikiotis argued that military unilateralism and a global war on terror are catalytic to further extremist reactions. He also suggested that Islam as a religion of civilisation can facilitate interfaith dialogue and democracy, as has occurred in South East Asia.

Kishkovsky discussed how accepting the identity of ‘the other’ strengthens the identity of oneself. He argued that common religious values concerning humanity should be conveyed into public language, to promote understanding and acceptance of shared security.

Key points of the discussion:

- The war on terror must adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law. This is the only way to demonstrate that there is an alternative to dealing with problems and conflicts. Today, terrorism and the extremist threat have been used to justify the limitation or suppression of human rights, which conversely breeds extremism and exacerbates the human dignity deficit.
- The ever growing cycle of revenge must be broken and replaced by fair and effective judicial processes. Efforts should also be taken to broaden and improve participation in democratic governance at the national level.
- Those deemed to slip into extremism or radicalism urgently need to be engaged in dialogue. Extremism is symptomatic of marginalisation and isolation – dialogue would, at least, create contact with others. It is important to consider how a novel approach could be initiated in the WANA region, perhaps. Perhaps women could play a vital role, as was the case in Northern Ireland.
- New actors, such as governments from South East Asia, should be engaged solving the complex problems of extremism and militancy in the WANA region. They could provide fresh perspectives on conflict resolution and cooperation, reform and political reconciliation, and pluralism in Islam, from their own experience. OIC eminent persons were suggested as potential mediators.
- Since the vast majority of people in the world are members of religious communities, these should be engaged in addressing extremism. Multi-religious cooperation for finding shared common values would help build understanding and cooperation. Shared values, in turn, could lead to shared security.
- Political processes often manipulate identity to the extreme, in order to find alternative answers to prevalent problems. Religion can suggest that it is critically important to recognise the humanity of ‘the other’ in order to affirm one’s own humanity. It would be useful to explore the possibilities of inter-faith cooperation to develop recognition of ‘the other’, from the level of acceptance to the level of social integration, and it would also be useful to link inter-faith dialogue with political dialogue.

SESSION 2: TACKLING THE HUMAN DIGNITY DEFICIT

Dubey argued that tackling the deficit of something as contested as human dignity, is problematic. He also highlighted the importance of empowerment from within and the role of economics in realising human dignity.

Mazari discussed the need for promoting human dignity in fighting extremism and violence. She also spoke about the need to bridge the gaps between the strong and weak as well as the rich and the poor.

Key points of the discussion:

- In order to satisfy the need for human dignity, the economy must be able to provide for people's needs. This requires developing social governance, in addition to macroeconomic policies, in the WANA region. There must be investment in people in order to fully realise the social capital of the region.
- The consistency of global reactions to financial and other crises needs to be enhanced by means of a return to multilateralism and improved regional cooperation.
- There is a need to systematically examine what the key human dignity deficits in different countries are. This would allow us to analyse and evaluate what steps should be taken. Revitalising the racial equality index is advisable.

SESSION 3: CREATING A PROCESS FOR COOPERATION AND SECURITY IN WANA

Pundak suggested a tripartite approach to securing Palestine, Israel and Jordan, due to many similar concerns as neighbours. A shift from prevailing mutual fear to mutual trust is imperative.

Orhun presented the nascent Centre for Mediterranean Humanities as a vehicle for intellectual exchange across the world's oldest cradle of civilisation. She argued this would also be useful for bridging the gap between Asia and Europe.

Key points of the discussion:

- Regional cooperation must focus on long-term regional interests rather than short-term national interests. Aims must be clearly defined before a regional process is initiated, to avoid the risk that the means become the end. It is important to first have a vision for the future and then develop the tools to get there. The European Union could help bring regional actors together and create a platform for dialogue. Reverse engineering is an important starting point –we need to have a clear vision of what the ultimate goals are. Such a vision of the future could allow us to achieve a sense of direction –a way to get out of the box we find ourselves locked in.

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- Third parties from outside the region need to be involved at the governmental as well as civil society level in order to identify regional commons, facilitate reconciliation and translate the desire for peace in the region into a peace process.
- Effective instruments are needed to complement the vision of a process for cooperation and security, with ownership from civil society and governments throughout WANA. Experiences in creating similar processes from other regions would be helpful.
- An inter-cultural process should be started among young people, particularly students, to discuss the kind of future they want for the region. To really have an impact, such a programme would also need to target those who are not part of the elite. The model of the Sri Lankan Regional Centre for Strategic Studies could be helpful for the WANA region.
- The Parliament of Cultures could help in creating dialogue and cooperation in the WANA, in the same way as civil society organisations did in the OSCE process. It was suggested that the Parliament of Cultures develop a curriculum of tolerance of different cultures.
- A regional energy charter and social charter could provide a good basis for developing regional cooperation, by means of bringing people together and broadening ownership. The objective is not to obtain charitable fund, but to pool the resources of the region to address common problems and threats. The experiences from South Asia, where social charters were successfully developed on the national then regional level, could be useful for the WANA region.
- The majority of the people in Israel and Palestine believe that a two-state solution is tantamount to developing good relations and cooperation in the region.
- As the spiritual capital for all three Abrahamic faiths, Jerusalem should retain a moral authority that transcends political divides. Creating a dignified living space in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas will only be achieved by addressing the impending demographic and environmental crises.

SESSION 4: INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION – CIVIL SOCIETY MOVING FORWARD

Sigmund presented the economic and social evolution of the EU and suggested that the development of a social charter for WANA could serve as a foundation for the greater inclusion of civil society in political processes, and also contribute to peace.

Salem spoke about the need to develop the notion of citizenship in the Middle East and the work and objectives of MECA to promote citizenship, democracy, inclusion, and East-West relations.

Key points of the discussion:

- Participation is not merely inclusion of the other in pre-prepared plans; rather it is sustained partnership on equal footing. The participation of citizens in their own governance adds to human dignity and human worth. It is important to discuss what organised civil society in the WANA region is. The example of Eastern Europe has proved that this is important for improving civil society participation in political processes.
- It is crucial to work at the grass roots level and engage those who dominate the streets of communities, as well as the minds of majorities, in order to disseminate social messages, often through religious organisations. The already-convinced are not the target audience. Encouraging peaceful and non-violent appeals for democracy is essential, so as to not provoke a violent response.
- The aim of MECA is to develop the notion of citizenship in the Middle East. MECA tries to achieve this through the positive communication between people and the realisation of rights and duties; that is, by giving the responsibility of creating a better future back to the people.
- At present, MECA has five priorities to note: 1) disseminating citizenship appeals; 2) organising a long overdue multi-stakeholder conference on national unity and reconciliation, to prevent sectarian conflict in Iraq; 3) organising a large assembly of citizens to assert their rights on the basis of the citizenship appeals; 4) launching an online virtual assembly for MECA; 5) developing different understandings of what ceasefire means in Israel and Palestine, in order to promote lasting peace.

SESSION 5: CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The participants concluded that scale, urgency and potential for implementation are the core dimensions of the issues at stake. While the magnitude of problems in the region is daunting, a step-by-step approach can achieve positive results. Urgent matters must not obscure long-term challenges and end results. There is a need to identify concrete tools, but not at the expense of a clear vision for the future.

Concrete steps proposed:

- The participants agreed to send a joint message (signed by HRH) to the G8 meeting in St. Petersburg, calling for the elimination of barriers for the sake of inclusive dialogue and stressing the urgency and importance of dealing with problems in the WANA region.
- Sigmund agreed to help in initiating work on terms of references for a regional social charter, together with partners from different regional stakeholders, including GCC countries. Dubey also offered to share the experiences of developing national and regional social charters in South Asia.

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- Finland will explore the possibility of working together with a regional focal point in order to prepare a study into the experiences of different regions in developing processes of cooperation, in view of initiating a similar process in the WANA region. The Human Dialogue Centre could provide input from South East Asia.
- A Helsinki Process roundtable will be held in Kyoto on 30th August, 2006, to discuss the role of religious organisations in politics and peace processes.
- A tripartite meeting of Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian NGOs will be held in Amman, in September 2006, to discuss common interests as a starting point for cooperation. Israelis need to acknowledge the human dignity of the Palestinians and Palestinians to acknowledge the right of Israel to exist. Bringing together all stakeholders is crucial for bringing about this paradigm shift.
- A meeting will be held with the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad, in December 2006, to discuss the concrete means of creating a process for cooperation and security in WANA.
- A meeting will be held with the Centre for Mediterranean Humanities in Turkey, in 2007, to discuss socio-cultural aspects of regional cooperation.

Other suggestions:

- A future meeting could be held to consider how to develop a multilateral framework for addressing long-term problems in the WANA region.
- The participants in the roundtable could send articles to newspapers and other media, raising awareness of the issues discussed, on a regular basis.
- The framework of the Asian Development Bank could assist in developing regional and trans-Asian cooperation. More West Asian countries should be encouraged to join.