

Egyptian-German Dialogue 2003 – 2009

Objectives, Contents, and Results. A Joint Statement

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the world has been shaped by confrontation between Arab countries on the one hand and Western countries on the other. In Western countries, the Middle East is seen as a breeding ground for terrorists and terrorism. Some political and religious forces in the Middle East, in their search for democracy and development, feel that there is a global Western conspiracy against Islam and Muslims, although the last few months have inspired hope for a more multilateral approach in international relations. If reached, this might pave the road for greater participation in the international system. Yet both sides are still feeling threatened.

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept 11th, the concept of the clash of civilizations has turned out to be more than a mere idea or argument. There is a strong feeling that the argument has apparently exacerbated tensions in the Middle East. The unsolved Palestinian problem and the ongoing misunderstanding between Arabs and the Western World coincide with a growing sense of religious, economic and political instability across the globe.

Given this situation, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, CEOSS,¹ and the Protestant Academy at Loccum, EAL², came to the conclusion that they could not overlook or ignore the global situation. They decided to start a dialogue initiative in 2003, substantiating a platform for dialogue between Muslims and Christians despite the challenges imposed by the invasion of Iraq.

Both organisations see dialogue as an alternative to violence. Through dialogue, people can maintain their different cultures and live in peace and harmony, identifying areas of consent and understanding, and areas of dissent and misunderstanding - a process that marginalises violence and helps build mutual perceptions based on constructive and fruitful coexistence.

Our efforts to promote dialogue both inside Egypt and Germany and between the two countries have been based on the conviction that there is no religious justification whatsoever for violence and that dialogue provides an opportunity for better understanding and co-operation.

The Egyptian-German dialogue is meaningful for both sides. On the German side, it would appear important to explore Egyptian experiences in the area of Muslim-Christian co-existence. On the Egyptian side, the dialogue helps identify areas of interaction between religion and the state from a secular perspective. This is currently a core problem in the democratic transition in Egypt. The German model of secularity proves to be attractive to intellectuals in Egypt in their attempt to find some form of reconciliation between religion and the state in public life.

¹ CEOSS is an Egyptian Christian development organisation established in 1950 and registered with the Ministry of Social Solidarity. In 1992, CEOSS, beside its main work in the area of comprehensive and sustainable development, established the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue to promote cultural and social understanding and citizenship and peace at local, regional and international levels.

² EAL is a centre which is part of the Lutheran Church of Hanover and encourages open-minded discussions.

Participants in the last Egyptian-German dialogue wrote, for instance, articles on the German secularist state, which does not ignore the role of religion, while it protects fundamental human rights such as freedom of belief, freedom of expression and the right of association.³

Goals of the Egyptian-German Dialogue

The Egyptian-German Dialogue aims to:

- change the image and negative rhetoric about Western states as being all involved in a conspiracy against Islam, as well as the image of Muslims as being all in favour of violence and terrorism;
- reduce prejudices and stereotypes;
- identify cultural and social factors that could cause societal tension;
- build bridges across cultures and share experience;
- address the issue of diversity and social groups and the impacts on democracy;
- promote international dialogue between participants on citizenship, democracy, human rights and modernisation processes;
- offer a positive model for other intercultural dialogues.

In 2003, the experiment started. It has turned out to be extraordinary in both intensity and commitment. On the initiative of the COPTIC EVANGELICAL ORGANISATION FOR SOCIAL SERVICES (CEOSS), co-operation was initiated with the EVANGELISCHE AKADEMIE LOCCUM to organise this Egyptian-German Dialogue. After three meetings in Cairo and four in Loccum, the time has come to take stock.

Some 30 to 50 persons from each side attended each round of the Egyptian-German Dialogue. The dialogue rounds brought together a wide spectrum of religious communities from Egypt and Germany. University professors from institutions of higher education, parliamentarians, diplomats, media professionals and activists from non-governmental organisations also took part in the dialogue.

The Egyptian embassy in Berlin and the German embassy in Cairo were involved. Meetings took place with both representatives of the governments and parliaments in Egypt and Germany, including ministers and high-ranking religious dignitaries.

The dialogue attracted public attention at the Cairo Book Fair, the Frankfurt Book Fair and the church conventions in Hanover and Cologne.

The point of departure of this dialogue project has been a shared conviction that, for the benefit of promoting mutual understanding between the two sides, co-operation and learning through intercultural dialogue can positively contribute to the consolidation of relations between Europeans and Arabs which are so vital in nature.

Thus the dialogue focussed on key issues of sharing experiences and ideas concerning cultural and social development both in Egypt and Germany in their respective international contexts. Special emphasis was placed on the self-understanding of Islamic and Christian religious communities and their role in assuring success of development efforts.

³ Following the fifth German-Egyptian dialogue, FID prepared two bulletins on how the Egyptian media tackled the dialogue between Germans and Egyptians. The reports have been sent to participants and concerned persons. From an analytical perspective, most of the articles introduced by the participants themselves highlighted the importance of understanding the German model of how to deal with different religious communities, including religious institutions, in a perspective that sustains their equal treatment vis a vis the state and in society.

I. The issues and their underlying significance

The issues addressed at the successive rounds of the dialogue focussed on a fundamental motive, namely the processes of modernisation in the two societies and their impact on the religions, on social structures, political culture and identities linked to traditional orientations and their transformation.

1. Religion and the state

The question of different perceptions about the relationship between the state and religion has been at the centre of discussions. On the German side, it was addressed in the context of historical developments which took place since the Peace of Westphalia and led to the secular state and legal regulations guaranteeing religious freedom to established churches. On the Egyptian side, the discussions addressed the distinction between the state and religion at the level of the nation state, while respecting the Islamic orientation of the constitution.

In Egypt, parts of Islamic law are enshrined in the constitution, whereas Christian churches are governed by special regulations. In Germany, the Evangelical and Catholic churches enjoy a public-law status, whereas Islam is organised along private-law regulations.

Given religious diversity in the two states, the question of how their religious constitutions will evolve in future needs to be addressed. The dialogue indicated that developments must be guided by the concept of equal treatment of religions rather than by a strict separation of state and religion according to a laicist model.

2. The state and civil society

There has been general consensus amongst the dialogue partners that self-organisation of civil society by means of initiatives and non-governmental organisations in all areas of life (social, cultural, ecological, etc.) is part of the political culture of modern societies. Civil-society forms of organisation are not legitimised by a political mandate. Even so, opportunities need to be created to enable them to develop below the parliamentary and government levels within the boundaries defined by the constitution and other legal regulations.

However, there are risks in the development of self-organised activities outside constitutional boundaries when they attempt at times to usurp political power. This undermines cohesion in society and the monopoly of power by the state. The right to resist applies only if the state itself acts against modern constitutional principles and/or if state agencies systematically infringe upon fundamental human rights.

3. State and terrorist violence

State violence is legitimate under the rule of constitutional law and must not be exercised arbitrarily and/or selectively. When used, it is imperative that all citizens, regardless of gender, race, religion and socio-economic affiliation, be equal before the law. At the international level, military actions should respect international law and must not be exercised unilaterally for the purpose of prevention, but only for self-defence. In this context, the dialogue partners discussed the legitimacy of international intervention in defence of human rights. They concluded that military interventions against human rights infringements can be legitimised only by the international community (United Nations). Unilateral military actions cannot claim legitimacy.

Terrorist violence is unanimously condemned by dialogue members from both sides. Specifically, violence justified on religious grounds or with reference to religious convictions to justify terrorist attacks was considered to be categorically unacceptable by the dialogue partners. However, no agreement was reached about where to draw the line between the human right to self-defence on the one hand, and acts of terrorism on the other. A situation in which innocent

civilians become the target of excessive and unethical violence, however, was considered to be a case to ponder. This applies to state violence in equal measure. There was general consensus that in order for religious communities to remain credible in their mission for peace, they have an obligation to abstain from legitimising any form of terrorist violence, be it by states or by individuals.

4. Identity and diversity of religions and cultures

The dialogue partners endorse both positive and negative freedom of religion. Positive freedom of religion means the right to practise one's own religious rituals and to express his/her religious convictions. It also comprises civil-society activities by religious groups, provided they comply with regulations under the rule of the law and do not seek to usurp the legislative, legal, and / or executive bodies of the state. As to negative freedom of religion, it means not to discriminate against persons who chose to be neither members of any established religious community nor be affiliated to any recognised religion.

The dialogue partners spoke up in favour of recognising cultural self-determination, respecting it in both national and international contexts. Culture creates a feeling of belonging and protects against becoming rootless, especially in a globalising world. Modernisation processes should not be controlled by an outside force. We are quite conscious of the fact that societies – through their interactions – are constantly changing and that exclusivity becomes a relative term. Yet rapprochement and opening-up processes should be pursued on the basis of dialogue and participation rather than under conditions of hegemonial domination that result from military, political, economic, technological and/or social asymmetries. This is where we perceive relationships to be particularly tension-prone and explosive owing to their complexity. They need to be addressed with special care and sensitivity both nationally and internationally, also with regard to increasing migration.

The dialogue partners emphasise the importance of successful integration processes. To understand diversity as a special asset in the local, regional and global community calls for adequate intellectual and operational processes to reconcile differences and resolve conflicts.

II. Differences of perception – terms and how their meaning developed historically

An efficient dialogue cannot be a mere consensual exercise. It must be possible to articulate different perceptions and to identify different opinions with mutual respect. The fact that this is an important condition for any successful dialogue was proved not only by the way in which the relationship between the Egyptian and German dialogue partners developed, but also by the different views expressed within the groups themselves. This is why the dialogue included phases of self-ascertainment in which one group was mostly listening to the other. These were often phases in which the "learning gain" was particularly great for the listeners.

We became very much aware of how important it was to clearly define the terms used in order to ensure mutual understanding. This was true, in particular, with regard to terms such as "secularisation", "modernisation" and "integration".

The German side noted that in the Islamic context, **secularisation** was emphatically associated with the process of driving religion out of public life. In this respect, secularism – in the sense of denying religion any influence on public affairs - and secularity have much in common. This explains the criticism of the secularisation process in "Western", notably European societies. At the same time, note was taken of the need for some measure of secularity in a multi-religious society for the sake of ensuring equal treatment of religions.

The Egyptian side noted that in the context of the self-perception of "Western" societies, secularisation also has positive connotations related to the emancipation from dogmatic religious claims (Enlightenment). Secularity, especially on the part of the state, is not at all

understood as a threat to religious communities, provided positive and negative freedom of religion is guaranteed. Yet mention also needs to be made of the fact that secularism – if defined in absolute terms - would be in conflict with religious freedom.

Secularism as an ideology – this was a conclusion shared by all – does not meet with approval in either the Egyptian or German society. However, secularisation takes place during the modernisation of society and requires special attention as to its socio-cultural effects and its political conditions. Secularity as a means of distinguishing between the political and religious spheres does not exclude, but includes a relationship of free non-preconditioned cooperation between the state and the religious communities.

As to the Egyptian understanding of **modernisation**, it indicated how much the term is related to historical experiences of policies enforced under external and internal control. It therefore has strong negative connotations for the general public in cases where cultural, ethnic, and religious identities are affected.

Yet it is equally clear that it is imperative to pay greater attention to aspects of modernisation, especially in the context of the globalisation process. Resultant conflict potential in domestic policy, notably divisions in society, can only be managed by increased levels of participation. Questions of possible integration concerning extreme positions also come up at this point.

As to the German understanding, it closely associates modernisation with progress in society. Modernisation processes tend to be regarded in a positive light, while resistance is seen to be negative for traditionalistic reasons. Modernisation is related to economic prosperity and social advancement. It has less to do with cultural or religious identity. Yet in the absence of economic prosperity and social progress, or if high-risk technologies provoke resistance on ethical grounds, modernisation is also perceived as a double-edged sword and easily becomes the object of public criticism.

In the Egyptian context, **integration** has more to do with political than religio-cultural aspects. For Germans, it is rather the reverse. From the Egyptian perspective, the focus is on the question of civil-society participation rather than integration. Integration is not a major issue here simply because the Egyptian identity of all citizens is a given fact in the self-perception of society.

Conversely, the problem of integration in Germany is linked to the question of how to reconcile the religious cultures of the majority influenced by the Christian faith and Islamic minorities, especially from a Turkish migration background. The fact that this problem was ignored in politics for a long time also gave rise to a parallelism of cultures at local levels that has made integration more difficult. It is only now that the need for specific support of migration cultures in education, training and career opportunities has attracted greater attention, especially against the background of demographic developments.

Even though the problem of political integration does exist here as well, it is limited to the fending-off of violent and politically extreme positions; it attracts a great deal of attention in the public media, yet opinions are divided as to its importance.

III. Problem areas of the dialogue

During those years, war actions, terrorist attacks, religious and cultural offenses, crisis-prone developments of a political, economic, and social nature left their mark on our mutual perceptions. Different assessments were brought up, especially in informal conversations during the meetings, but also in the discussions and inputs during the official programme. This did not prevent the dialogue from continuing. On the contrary, it confirmed the need to act with even greater urgency. The different perceptions were incorporated in the dialogue and could thus be articulated. This was also proof of the degree of trust that was developing between the dialogue partners and was being maintained even when opinions remained divided.

Different assessments were mainly related to trends in “big politics” and how they were presented in the media.

Honest “hermeneutics” (understandings) of the dialogue must identify the attitudes which inhibit mutual communication and understanding. We see them at work in the fears which are projected onto each other, in applying double standards which practically undermine shared and recognised values, and in forms of self-assertion rejecting any criticism of one’s own conduct.

1. Fears

The reasons for fears are real. Feelings of threat are triggered by interventionist wars, attacks, offences, claims of superiority and dominance, infringements upon other people’s identity, blasphemy and disparagement of deep convictions of faith. They provoke equally apodictic reactions in return. When they become firmly entrenched patterns of mutual perception, a dialogue is left without a chance.

For the sake of facilitating the dialogue, we therefore give preference to differentiated views instead of generalisations of an absolute nature. This should provide opportunities for explaining and discussing in an unbiased manner as well as for building trust between those who do not wish to polarise but instead wish to make progress in solving the problems at hand.

2. Double standards

When talking of double standards we mean behaviour that gives priority to one’s own position at the expense of common values declared generally binding. They are applied, in particular, in situations where one’s own “law” can be enforced asymmetrically. The objectively weaker party is caught up in the role of being the victim. Such situations are accompanied by feelings of helplessness as well as forms of counter-violence. This is where conflict orientation threatens to dominate dialogue-based communication.

In the interest of dialogue-based conflict management and in view of our own experience in the dialogue, we are in favour of clearly identifying, and giving serious thought to, any application of double standards. In so doing, efforts need to be made not to infringe upon people’s personal integrity wilfully and instead to focus on understanding the matter under discussion.

3. Self-assertion and self-criticism

Self-assertion is a legitimate form of fending off insinuations, misinterpretations, disregard and attempts to dominate discussions. It becomes a problem when attack and defence become so firmly entrenched as a pattern as to make any critical reflection impossible. The change of perspective to understand the truth in the argument of the other – even if no agreement is reached – requires a fundamentally self-critical attitude. However, if self-criticism of one side is taken advantage of by the other in a disparaging manner, the trust placed in the truthful nature of the dialogue is undermined.

In the interest of a dialogue based on mutual understanding and truthfulness, we support the creation of “protected spaces”, on the one hand enabling self-critical reflection of positions and on the other promoting the sensitivity required for meeting such self-criticism with the necessary respect.

IV. How to proceed?

The dialogue partners agree that dialogues of this kind, which include civil-society, the state, religions, academic actors, intellectuals and the media, are playing an important part in mutual perceptions and the management of diversity. The Egyptians and the Germans, acting as bridges between Europe and the Arab world, can bring together important multipliers from our

countries and offer them an opportunity to develop differentiated views that may contribute to the building-up of trust in crisis situations. In view of our geographic proximity and a common history which has been difficult at times and sometimes tended to be violent, this is extremely important for the future of the two countries.

This applies, in particular, to the younger generation who is gradually assuming responsibility in many areas of our societies. This is the reason for the next step within the framework of our initiative, ie to offer young élites the opportunity to take part in as well as to shape such dialogue projects.

Against the background of our own experience in the dialogue, we favour the development of a young leaders dialogue project. The aim is to bring together young élites, across occupations as well as from specific occupational backgrounds, especially those with little previous experience in international meetings. We see this as a mission in support of peaceful relations between our two countries and beyond.