

Bridge the Gap, or Mind the Gap?

Culture in Western-Arab Relations

Maurits Berger, Els van der Plas, Charlotte Huygens,
Neila Akrimi and Cynthia Schneider

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Introduction

Maurits Berger¹

Arab-Western relations are deadlocked in a sphere of mistrust. The many initiatives by Western governments and NGOs have time and time again hit the granite wall of suspicion on the Arab side. This suspicion is mostly founded on prejudices, but that is exactly the reason why it is so hard to overcome. Thinking about new policies and activities therefore demands, first and foremost, thinking about ways to break the deadlock.

One possible inroad may be culture, a relatively unknown field of cooperation *vis-à-vis* the Arab world. The importance of culture in connecting with political and social issues is not entirely new. But it is indeed the new kid on the block in diplomatic circles as the much-applauded ‘public diplomacy’ has not proved very successful. This may be attributed to the difference in approach between public and cultural diplomacy: while public diplomacy is unilateral with an emphasis on explaining one’s policies to the others, cultural diplomacy takes a bi- or multilateral approach with an emphasis on mutual recognition. Cultural diplomacy is therefore explicitly not meant to be the promotion of a national culture.² Cultural diplomacy focuses on common

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2) This position differs from definitions of cultural diplomacy presented in, for instance, ‘Cultural Diplomacy, the Linchpin of Public Diplomacy’, report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy of the US Department of State, September 2005, or, Helena Kane Finn, ‘Cultural Diplomacy and US Security’, keynote address to the Conference on Cultural Diplomacy amid Global Tensions, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 14 April 2003.

ground, and the condition thereto is that one needs to know what makes the other tick.

It is this ‘ticking’ in its broadest sense – identity, arts and letters, traditions, human relations, politics, etc. – that makes up the ‘culture’ of the other. Culture is therefore a vague term that has deterred the practical-minded from pursuing this track and has enticed the theoretical-minded to dwell in endless discussions on the definition of culture. But perhaps one can cut short these debates by stating that cultural diplomacy primarily focuses on understanding the other by looking at the variety of ways that the other expresses itself.

There is, however, a trap waiting for those who endeavour in cultural diplomacy, and that is the trap of cultural relativism. Any action or situation contradicting ‘our’ values can easily be justified by ‘that is the way we do it over here’. And indeed, these justifications abound among Arabs as well as Westerners. Corruption is justified with ‘typical Arab’ clientelism and patronage, the lack of democracy with ‘typical Arab’ authoritarianism, the subjugated position of women with the ‘typical Arab’ patriarchal attitude. Such an attitude, however, shows an unwillingness to engage actively in situations that need reform, and a laziness to understand the root causes of what are perceived as abuses and wrongs. Evading the trap of cultural relativism and remaining in dialogue with the other party while at the same time not abandoning one’s principles, *that* is why cultural diplomacy is called ‘diplomacy’. Not because it is the work that diplomats should do, but because it is an interaction that requires diplomatic skills on a human level.

Is culture in general, and cultural diplomacy in particular, indeed a way to bridge the gap between Western and Arab worlds in terms of development cooperation? This was the topic of a conference named ‘Bridging the Gap’, which was organized by the Development Policy Research Project (DPRN) and the Clingendael Institute on 16 November 2007. A number of renowned speakers gave presentations on the subject. Four of these presentations have been selected for publication: two from a cultural perspective; and two from a policy perspective. Together they represent a discussion of the key issues that are often raised when discussing cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Perspective

The first author, Els van der Plas, defines culture not as a phenomenon but as a function, and discerned three such functions: culture as a generator of beauty; culture as a mode of revealing tensions and taboos; and culture as a means of identification. Culture as a generator of beauty, van der Plas argues, is not a mere source of arts, but ‘beauty creates hope that things will get better’ as well as a universal bond of enjoying beauty.

Also, culture provides one with ‘identity and a place in the world’. The relevance of this rather general statement comes in van der Plas’s observation

that 'if one has a more confident image of oneself, it is more easy to understand and respect the other'. This approach to culture is taken up by the second author, Charlotte Huygens, who mentions the importance of 'cultural security', defined by Jean Tardiff as 'the capacity of a society to conserve its specific character in spite of changing conditions and real or virtual threats'.

Here we enter the heart of the conflict between the Western and Arab worlds, which is on both sides experienced as aggression by the other against one's way of life. The cry of 'Why do they hate us?' and President's Bush's claim that 'They hate our freedom and democracy' are representative of the Western concern of Arab-Islamic intentions. On the Arab side, one is struggling with contradictions between traditions perceived as typically 'Arabic' and a Western influx of political, social and economical conceptions in addition to dress code, music and arts, and other metaphors of image – the fact that this 'influx' is often imported by Arabs themselves, rather than imposed upon them, merely adds to the confusion.

How to cope with this mutual antagonism that is clogging all lines of communication? Because the problem appears not to be *what* is being said, but *how* it is said and by *whom* it is said. Charlotte Huygens makes a strong case for reciprocity in communication, which implies equality between parties and hence the preparedness *on both sides* to negotiate one's values and positions. One cannot maintain absolute independence when entering into relations with the other, Huygens maintains. If you do so, you will never get to know the other but only the image that you create of the other. Giving up part of your independence may yield results by getting the input of the other, which is by definition the image that they have of themselves. Only when both sides are able to exchange their own views, opinions, conceptions and images, are they actually communicating. This demands mutual recognition. And once the channel is unclogged, one can focus on *what* is being communicated.

This understanding of what cultural policy is supposed to mean is taken up by the third author, Neila Akrimi, who in her discussion of European foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the Arab world argues that the 'dialogue of cultures' should be transformed into a 'culture of dialogue'.

Political Perspective

Neila Akrimi and Cynthia Schneider are the two contributors focusing on the political perspective of cultural policy. An interesting difference between the two contributors is their regional scope. Akrimi focuses on the European Neighbourhood Policy regarding Europe's southern neighbour states, from Turkey to Morocco. The EU, by force of expediency, has entered into so-called Association Agreements with these Mediterranean neighbours, which have a carrot-and-stick quality: promises of economic cooperation are made conditional on certain political conditions. It is generally known that the stick function is rarely invoked, but relations between the European Union and its

southern neighbours are still not very warm and friendly. Neila Akrimi points her finger at the lopsided relations between the two sides. She argues that the Mediterranean basin is the testing ground for the success of dialogue, and cultural policy should in her opinion therefore be 'central to the geopolitical agenda' of the European Union. This is not the case, however, because even though culture is declared a 'valid dimension' of the European Union's foreign relations, 'it seems of marginal relevance compared to "big issues" like security, trade, migration, etc.'

The region that Cynthia Schneider covers is in much more of a predicament: ever since '9/11' (but already long before that) the United States has been struggling with a bad image and reputation in the Arab world. Schneider presents a quick overview of recent American strategies to 'win hearts and minds' in the Arab world, and then gives very practical suggestions for what can be done in the field of cultural diplomacy. While she agrees with Akrimi that cultural diplomacy is a means of communication, Schneider limits the means of communication to the arts: 'Creative expression crosses cultures, helping people from diverse backgrounds to find common ground'. The functions of culture mentioned by Els van der Plas come to mind.

This focus on culture in its restricted sense is also an indication of the limited means that are left to the United States to reassert its goodwill towards the Arab region. However, this is exactly what both of the first two contributors warn against: culture should never become a means, but should always remain an end in itself.

Mind the Gap

One question that stands out in all of the articles is *why* do we want to engage in cultural diplomacy? Is it indeed to 'bridge' the gap? What, then, exactly is this gap? Some will argue that it is the difference in thinking on key issues, like different views on how to govern ('political culture') or in gender issues ('social culture'). One can easily understand that if, from a Western perspective, these cultures are perceived as 'wrong' – and these perceptions may indeed be very true and justified – Western policies aim at amending these wrongs. It appears that these missionary policies have ground to a halt. Regardless of how one thinks of the necessity or morality of such policies, one is now faced with the fact that all lines of communications are congested.

The real gap at the moment is therefore the need to reopen communication with the Arab world. Of course, one may also decide not to do so and to let them be. Ultimately, that will be more to the disadvantage of the Arabs than to the Westerners. But if one decides that there is a need for re-entering into dialogue, cultural policy as defined here may very well be a way to do it. This cultural policy demands that one enters a relationship on the basis of equality and reciprocity. It also demands a genuine interest in the other: where does it stand, what does it think, and why does it think that way?

‘Culture’ in this respect is the ‘otherness’ of the other, not because we define the other so, but because the other defines itself as different from us. Whether these differences are real or merely perceived – well, that is where the ‘diplomacy’ comes in: to overcome differences and find common ground.

To get the two sides to agree on a number of issues will require hard work. Rather than aiming at ‘bridging’ gaps, it may already be sufficient if we ‘mind’ the gaps – perhaps we can already reach inroads for mutual trust and cooperation when we, to use the expression of the authors, ‘mind’ the gap.

Culture and its Relationship to Society

*Els van der Plas*¹

Can culture make a contribution towards influencing politics and society, and towards closing the ‘gap’ that exists in our society between Islam and the West? These questions are being discussed at the ‘Bridge the Gap’ symposium at the Clingendael Institute. But I would like to start by calling out ‘Mind the Gap’!

Mind the Gap is the name of a graphic design agency in Beirut, which employs young designers and artists who create designs for books, posters, flyers and other assignments. Their work is modern, hip and cool. Among other things, they produced the design for two books about the Lebanese studio photographer Hashem Al Madani in collaboration with the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), a picture library in Beirut.² The AIF has archived, scanned and documented the work of Madani. Madani has a studio in Saida, to the South of Beirut, where he has produced portraits and studio photographs for many years. He is now 79 and his work includes portraits of people and life in Lebanon through the years.

1) Director of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development in The Hague and Member of the Board of Directors of the Stedelijk Museum (museum of modern art) in Amsterdam.

2) Lisa le Feuvre and Akram Zaatari, *Hashem Al Madani*, published by Mind the Gap, *la Fondation Arabe pour l’Image* and The Photographer’s Gallery, 2004.

Two weeks ago, I travelled to Beirut to attend the opening of the exhibition in the souk in Saida. The exhibition consisted of photographs taken by Madani of small shops and their owners during the 1950s. The exhibition was also held in these same small shops. Many of them still exist – as do a few of their owners. It turned into something of a *Chambres d'Amis* through Saida,³ with conversations with the current owners about the past, memories about forgotten times and exchanges between generations, religions and different layers of the population. In this instance, photography produced a beautiful exhibition, as well as a route that allowed one to engage with people while passing through one of the oldest elements of Lebanese cultural heritage. The exhibition focused attention on various social and cultural issues, namely: 1) the value of the Lebanese photographic heritage – by thoroughly documenting, archiving and exhibiting the work of Madani; 2) the value of the architectural heritage – by locating the exhibition in one of the few remaining old souks in and around Beirut; and 3) for valuing historical objects instead of demolishing everything and building anew.

Bridge the Gap is the name of a Dutch newspaper blog (*De Volkskrant*) devoted to the differences and similarities between, among others, Islam and the West. It provides a forum for discussing problems in the Netherlands and in the rest of the world and mostly regurgitates clichés. There is no photography to provide a silent witness to history, no poetry that subtly addresses thorny issues, no plays reflecting our traumatic experiences. There is nothing but the Dutch principle of ‘straight talk’ or ‘saying what one thinks’. *Bridge the Gap* does not seem to solve much, but creates more of the *gap*, which they so much like to bridge.

And when one googles *Bridge the Gap*, one generally comes across websites focusing on Islam and the West. In fact, many people immediately associate *Bridge the Gap* with the disturbed relationship between Muslims and the West, which – in Europe – often entails an appeal for solutions that would not be my solutions: more security, less migration, more regulations and less tolerance.

Could culture contribute to narrowing this growing division?

Culture

Let me start by stating that culture is not the means to an end, but an end in itself. I would like to define culture in its broader sense. This dynamic view of culture is based on the assumption that culture is constantly changing. Culture involves the ways that people go about their daily lives and the values and processes that make life meaningful. I am particularly interested in the

3) *Chambres d'Amis* was an exhibition that showed work in houses and other private places in the city of Gent, Belgium, curated by Jan Hoet in 1986.

development of ideas and ideals and the manner in which people give form to them. Culture is crucial to human life for a number of important reasons, and in relation to these, culture can perhaps contribute to narrowing the growing divisions.

Beauty

First, culture creates beauty. Human beings cannot do without beauty. It generates hope that things will become better, creates respect for life and provides personal and social identity. Sometimes, beauty may even help one to understand why one is alive. It provides enthusiasm for and meaning to life.

The concept of beauty is often underestimated. It also creates a bond. It is not the idea of universal beauty that bonds – because everyone has his or her own idea of beauty – but the universal pleasure that exists in the perception of beauty. In short, each culture defines beauty in a different way, but in all cultures it represents the same positive emotions and life values. That is why we all have the capacity to perceive beauty. We may not all perceive it in the same way, but we can empathize with the feelings that beauty evokes. This universal concept of beauty is what unites people the world over, and transcends our cultural differences.

That is why we were all so horrified when the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan were destroyed in 2001 and the National Museum in Baghdad was plundered in 2003. As we all remember, many people felt a sense of powerlessness following the looting and destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage. War destroys not only human lives but also contemporary and traditional cultural heritages. Those who seek to erase an important cultural heritage do so in order to destroy the dignity and identity of its people. This is one of the strongest possible arguments for the importance of beauty and its cultural expressions.

Now I would like to share with you a disturbing story from the Palestinian photographer Rula Halawani:

On the 28th of March 2002, I was in Ramallah when the major Israeli incursion happened; I was shocked; everything around me looked so different. Every street and square I visited was dark and empty; no one was in the streets that day except the Israeli army and its tanks. I felt depressed and cold. The only Palestinian I met on the road that day was an old man. He was shot dead. I never knew his name, but I had seen him walking around those same streets before. That night I could not

erase his face from my memory, and many questions without answers
rushed inside my head. It was that night that my hopes for peace died.⁴

Her experience is difficult and sad. Yet she produced beautiful photographs of the busy and heavily guarded Qalandia checkpoint, which she called *Intimacy* and which show the physical *contact* between the Israeli custom officials and the Palestinian individuals who want to or have to cross the border. The beautiful, intimate photographs represent a counter-force against the political violence that responds to aggression with more aggression; intimacy and beauty as an opposing force.

Spaces of Freedom

Culture could also offer the possibility to say things that would otherwise remain hidden. Critical analyses regarding politics and enemies, turning a taboo that keeps a society in its embrace into a subject for discussion and/or dealing with traumatic experiences could all contribute to dialogue and the normalization of situations that appear to have escalated beyond control.

One of the critical image archives of the Lebanese photographer and artist Walid Raad is *Notebook / Digital Color Prints, 1999-2002*. This notebook contains 145 cut-out photographs of cars. Each of the notebook pages includes a cut-out photograph of a car that matches the exact make, model and colour of every car that was used as a car bomb in the Lebanese wars of 1975 to 1991, as well as text written in Arabic that details the place, time and date of the explosion, the number of casualties, the perimeter of destruction, the exploded car's engine and axle numbers, and the weight and type of the explosives used. The archive represents an indictment of war and violence in a way that creates structure, which aims at discussion and represents the stylized expression of an urgent demand for attention.

Walid Raad is a member of the Atlas Group, which he personally established. It is an ongoing research project that he initiated in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon. One of his aims with this project is to locate, preserve, study, and produce audio, visual, literary and other artefacts that shed light on Lebanon's contemporary history. It is important to note that some of the documents, stories and individuals that he presents with this project are real in the sense that they exist in the historical world, and that others are imaginary in the sense that he imagined and produced them. As such, the Atlas Group project, with its real and

4) This quotation is found online at http://www.stationmuseum.com/Made_in_Palestine-Rula_Halawani/Made_in_Palestine-Rula_Halawani.htm.

imaginary documents, characters and stories, operates between the false binary of fiction and non-fiction.⁵

Raad's work, which is rich in fantasy and criticism, provides a way of release for people – allowing them to address difficult issues. At times, it also provides a moment of reflection on the madness of life – because situations exist that seem to be more fantastic than can be imagined.

Place in the World

In addition to providing beauty and opportunities for criticism, culture also gives one an identity and a place in the world. Who one is, what one is and one's position in society are all closely related to culture. If one has a more confident image of oneself, it is easier to respect and understand others. Cultural heritage, religion and customs and practices provide one with a sense of self-respect and place. This can result in more faith in the future. These are essential elements in narrowing the growing gap between the Arab world and the West. Emphasizing culture, supporting it, stimulating the qualities associated with it and ensuring that culture can flourish in areas where it is normally not possible will contribute to this art of living together.

Nowadays, living together is an evolving art rather than a given. We no longer seem capable of accepting each other's singularities and peculiarities. In Europe, there have been growing problems with migrant groups – and particularly Muslim communities – over the last ten to twenty years. In addition, there are escalating numbers of Africans at the borders of southern Europe, all of whom are seeking a better life. At the same time internal problems in Europe are intensifying: a football match can turn into a battlefield; young people in French suburbia seek their place in society; differences between generations can be bigger than between people of different backgrounds; (political) beliefs have already resulted in murder, also in the Netherlands.

It was in 2002 that the Prince Claus Fund presented the question of successful coexistence during the 'Living Together' conference, which was held during the International Film Festival in Zanzibar. The island of Zanzibar is a shining example of a multi-faith and multicultural society; it symbolizes the relations between the East, the South and the West, between Asia, Africa and Europe.

The Zanzibar conference in 2002 tried to formulate some important points that are essential to a society's successful functioning and are all related in some way to culture: respect for and trust in other peoples cultures and views; creating spaces for a diversity of cultures and faiths; creating possibilities for the individual and his or her personal development; providing

5) From the lecture that Walid Raad gave at the World Wide Video Festival in Amsterdam in the 'Meet the Artists' programme in 2003.

spaces for different forms of expression. These are not surprising conclusions. We could also include the creation and experiencing of art and culture, which can contribute to our happiness and well-being and to a successful coexistence in general.

Cultural Heritage

There are other aspects that make art and culture vital to humankind. Culture is essential – as the artists and archaeologists of Iraq and Afghanistan will confirm – for the creation and preservation of a country's cultural heritage and, therefore, for the development of cultural history. This cultural history imbues each individual and society with a sense of respect and identity.

In 2005 I was in Kabul, Afghanistan, to present the Prince Claus Award to Omar Khan Massoudi, the director of Kabul's National Museum. Both he and his staff risked their lives to save a great deal of cultural heritage in Kabul and Afghanistan. Yet members of the Taliban still managed to smash large parts of the National Museum's collection into thousands of pieces – magnificent fifth-century Buddhas, extraordinary statues of Hindu gods and other religious and non-religious objects that were not in keeping with the Taliban's view of Islam. The Taliban were also responsible for blowing up Afghanistan's ancient Bamiyan Buddhas.

I visited the floor at the Museum that is dedicated to sorting these thousands of pieces – a process that consists of discovering what belongs where – to enable the smashed fragments to be restored. Squatting on the ground, the Afghans were rebuilding their cultural treasures with infinite patience. Each priceless statue had been destroyed in just a few minutes, while its restoration would take many months and long hours of labour.

Thanks to these people, a large part of this collection will be exhibited in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam from 20 December 2007 until 20 April 2008. 'Hidden Afghanistan', as the large collection of Bactrian gold and historical heritage is called, travels from Paris, to Turin and Washington. To Afghanistan it is their cultural pride. The public in the receiving countries see artefacts of a centuries-old culture, which now only makes the headlines because of misery. It is of the utmost importance to see a different Afghanistan, to see its cultural heritage and to understand why it is so important that it is conserved. Cultural contexts create understanding of and in-depth insight into a person, a culture and a country.

Cultural Discomfort

Cultural activities and expressions do not *always* result in positive change. We have become all too aware of this situation over the past ten to fifteen years.

This is also the case when we observe the European multicultural situation; the fact that a religious murder was committed in the Netherlands shows that something is amiss in this small and water-rich country that has always been known for its tolerance and openness. Cultural differences and a lack of cultural understanding play a crucial role here. Of course, it is also a matter of 'having' or 'not having', but it is first and foremost about the desire and ability to accept and respect each other's cultural characteristics and customs. It is therefore important to support and respect cultural activities, especially in those countries and regions where there is major cultural unrest or a real likelihood of this occurring.

Culture is perhaps not some magic potion, yet it does imbue people with a sense of value, a feeling that life is worth living and an awareness of location and purpose. Culture can connect people, can bridge gaps, and can contribute to a pleasurable way of living together. So, *mind the gaps*, but try also to bridge them through cultural exchanges and productions.

The Art of Diplomacy, the Diplomacy of Art

Charlotte Huygens¹

Regarding the definition of culture – and in the framework of today’s conference on cultural dialogue – Rather, I argue in favour of the establishment of a transcultural dialogue along flexible, thematic lines across states and regions rather than between fixed geographic entities.² There is no such thing as a closed culture. Even in the far past, elites have been in continuous exchange with foreign cultures. However, our international system is founded on states, even if reality never completely conformed to it, and we should certainly not ignore these meaningful frames of reference.

Cultural Security: The Relevance of Arts in the Balance of Power

Today the media, even more than transport mobility, play a growing role in interactions between societies and cultures. In this context, the large media conglomerates are persistently criticized by those in other cultures who see them as instruments for promoting Western values and establishing a

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- 1) Curator of Arts and the Islamic World, Project Curator for the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, and Member of the Netherlands Council for Culture (a museum committee).
 - 2) See also Rafeaella A. Del Sarto, ‘Setting the (Cultural) Agenda: Concepts, Communities and Representations in Euro-Mediterranean Relations’, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 10, no. 3, November 2005, pp. 313-330.

profoundly unequal 'dialogue'. Here I would like to point to an article by Jean Tardif on intercultural dialogue and cultural security.³ He defines cultural security as 'the capacity of a society to conserve its specific character in spite of changing conditions and real or virtual treats'. The notion of security is taken as a fundamental concern for every society, including for cultural matters, as well as a central question of international relations that must always be addressed. Tardif underlines the importance of equal dignity of cultures as a condition for dialogue and real exchange, and states that 'for culture, more than in any other area, we must assume an obligation to decentre oneself as essential to understand problems of identity and security'. No cultural dialogue can succeed when inequalities are too great or when it is controlled by the most powerful. Creating conditions for dialogue among cultures involves acceptance of each other as equal in dignity and being able to question oneself about values, practices and adaptation to contemporary global conditions – in short, creating more balanced relations.

To this aim, the relevance of arts is unsurpassable. It is through art and culture that people perceive themselves, identify themselves, question themselves and take pride and joy in themselves – as individuals and as a group. Art mirrors society. Art reflects developments and comments upon situations. Arts can visualize tradition or change, progress or regression, extraversion or introversion, globalization as well as nationalism. Artworks can be deeply engaged in political or social affairs. They can be extremely critical, avant-gardist or utopian. They are an unequalled source of cultural information. But most of all, art creates opportunities to transcend borders and widen horizons.

However, if arts – or a deliberate selection or combination of artworks – are made instrumental to goals other than artistic expression, they can no longer fulfil their distinctive role and merely reflect the official policy of a country or other cultural entity. Here I mention the example of a ministry of foreign affairs that gave big money to film projects that should promote Western values in Iran. Even if it had worked, it has nothing to do with cultural exchange or arts.

It is especially its distance to power and issues of the day that makes art valuable in our understanding of societies and in international relations. It is the independence of arts that cultural diplomacy should cherish and support. Let arts be arts, not an instrument to an end.

In various recent articles, people warn of 'the Dutch closing their minds'.⁴ This terrifying scenario will lead into a dead-end alley of introversion and intolerance that can only have disastrous effects. Open-mindedness towards other cultures is an essential condition for creativity, for new

3) Jean Tardif, 'Intercultural Dialogues and Cultural Security', available online at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/cultural/2002/09intercultural.htm>.

4) For example, Dutch Secretary of State for European Affairs Frans Timmermans, interviewed by Jos Schuring, 'Staatssecretaris Timmermans over internationaal cultuurbeleid', *SICA Bericht*, 8 November 2007.

inspiration and balanced international relations. It is essential for the flourishing of any country.⁵

Gaps to Bridge or Different Interests to Observe?

In 2007 I was involved in Dutch cultural diplomacy on an unexpected occasion: the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited me to give a lecture on the occasion of International Women's Day. At the same day, a critical report on women's rights in the Arab world was also on the agenda. It had already been the cause of dissension between the Ministry and Arab missions.

I decided to speak on the role of Arab women in contemporary arts. Researching the subject, it struck me how extensive their role has been. Women of higher social standing and female artists have founded art schools, written *catalogues raisonnés*, joined Cobra and other international art movements, introduced new concepts and broken with taboos.

To my pleasant surprise, several Dutch diplomats approached me afterwards with requests about how to support these women in their work. This interest did not reflect the admirable wish to stimulate the artistic climate in the Arab world. Rather, the diplomats were committed to the goals of the ministry: empowerment of women in general, and of progressive and influential women as role models for civil society ideals in particular.

Representatives from Arab missions also let me know how much they had appreciated the subject, my balance of the facts in reporting on women's rights and presenting a more favourable side of their countries.

The subject had had something to offer to these different representatives; it had been able to serve different interests. A fundamental wish to connect to both sides, to take different interests into account, to be respectful in both directions, is a basic condition to bridging any gap.

Let me make a further point: as a player in the field of relations with the Islamic world, one is easily considered an advocate of ideologies and ideals – either with us or against us. But in order to be an effective partner in intercultural relations, it is essential for cultural producers – and especially curators – to keep a professional distance from any social, religious or political goals. Even though the times have passed when curators and museums were believed to present one unshakable truth, artistic value should always be their point of reference. I underline that artistic values can vary greatly in time and place. Today, when cultural producers speak of the global character of arts, it usually refers to the Western norms dominating the art scene – a dominance that by its nature can remain invisible. Accountability for the criteria that they are applying and for the sources that they consult should be an essential part

5) Hans Weijers, CEO AKZO Nobel, 'The Only Way to Achieve Innovation is to Regularly Confront People with Other Ways of Thinking', *Zembla, NPS/VARA TV*, 25 November 2007.

of the professional responsibility of curators and other cultural decision-makers.

This may seem logical, or easy, but it is not. Especially regarding the Islamic world, and even more so after '9/11', there are enormous interests at stake. Western governments wish to justify their actions against Islamic regimes. Islamic countries wish to show their best side to the world. Municipalities wish to diminish tensions between different ethnic and social groups. Religious leaders wish to support their beliefs. Minority groups wish to promote their emancipation. And so on.

Having said this, I will quickly move on to a number of different experiences that I had in dealing with arts and the Islamic world. In all matters, the focus will be on the interaction between politics and art: the interesting and profitable side of it, as well as the dangers and pitfalls.

The Case of Morocco: Two Exhibitions Celebrating 400 Years of Dutch-Moroccan Diplomatic Contacts

The Amazigh (Berber) Identity as a Hot Issue

Let me start with the example of an issue that reached many Dutch newspapers during 2007: the conflict between Arab and *Tamazight* (Berber)-speaking Moroccan-Dutch young men in the Netherlands.⁶ Strangely enough, I did not see women mingling in the discussions, although we have several excellent women writers and journalists of the same background.

The issue was the 'occupation' of Morocco by the Arabs (the Islamic conquest, from the eighth century onwards), suppressing the Amazigh identity of Morocco's original inhabitants. Let me start by saying that this feeling of suppression is certainly not without historical basis. The Arab-Muslim victors imposed their culture and language to a great extent on the people they conquered. At the same time, they usually did not violate the rights of those people to another, supplementary identity, in North Africa expressed by the original Amazigh language and way of living. In cities, like elsewhere in most Muslim countries, the dominant culture became 'Arabized', although also the Arab-speaking city dwellers of Morocco are mainly of Amazigh origin. Many of them are still, after all those centuries, bilingual. In the countryside, however, culture remained Amazigh. In the Netherlands, most Moroccan immigrants come from the countryside, even the 'difficult' countryside of the north, the Rif. The Rif has always been very proud of its independence, but had to submit to French colonial powers. The

6) *Amazigh* (pl. *Imazighen*), meaning 'free person', is the correct term for Berber, the indigenous population of North Africa. The name Berber is related to our word barbarian, indicating 'strange, foreign'. The Berber languages are usually grouped under the name *Tamazight*.

French established a ‘*divide et impera*’ policy that made great distinctions between Amazigh and Arab-speaking groups of the population. After Morocco regained independence in 1956, the King and his government imposed a stringent language policy of Arabization, whereas over 70 per cent of all citizens were analphabetic. This implied, for example, that Amazigh parents were not allowed to give their children Amazigh names. School education and media in *Tamazight*, any of the Berber languages, were forbidden. It was only in 2001, after the death of King Hassan II, that an institute for Amazigh Heritage (IRCAM) was established in Rabat, and more privileges were granted to the representatives of this heritage. This is quite a complex introduction, but let me show you how this important political matter in Morocco affected Dutch society, exhibition practice and international cultural relations.

For almost fifteen years, I worked as curator of Arts and the Islamic World in the World Arts Museum in Rotterdam.⁷ Like most museums, our Rotterdam museum had an outreach policy, to familiarize people who do not usually go to museums. Migrant communities in the Netherlands *grosso modo* belong to these non-visitors, so I had established good contacts with their representatives. Given the background of the group, it will not surprise you that they wished the museum to dedicate full attention to the Amazigh issue. This we did in our collection policy and our permanent presentations, so relations with this community were flourishing.

But then, in 2004, I was requested by the Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam to be an adviser for their large exhibition marking 400 years of formal, diplomatic relations between the Netherlands and Morocco. The Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam is one of the largest exhibition venues in the Netherlands (you may know this church building at Dam Square from the royal weddings taking place there). This exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk focused on the period from prehistory to the end of the nineteenth century.⁸ Amazigh heritage was duly given its place. The Nieuwe Kerk even developed an audio tour in *Tamazight*, for first-generation Moroccan immigrants. Never before had any Dutch exhibition venue attracted so many so-called ‘new Dutch’ (immigrant) visitors. The success was enormous. The only blemish was just before the opening, when Morocco threatened to retire all of the objects if the Nieuwe Kerk did not replace a map picturing the Spanish Sahara as separated from Morocco.

It is important to remark that this exhibition opened just after the murder of Theo van Gogh, the film director, by a Dutch youth of Moroccan origin. The murder had great impact on Dutch society and put Dutch-Moroccan relations under great tension. In the views of many, the exhibition had a sort

7) Until 2000 it was officially named *Museum voor Volkenkunde* (Museum of Ethnology), then *Wereldmuseum Rotterdam*.

8) Vincent Boele (ed.), *Marokko: 5000 jaar cultuur* (Amsterdam: KIT, 2005), also published in French.

of healing effect. It bridged the gap that was hit in relations between the Netherlands and Morocco – not only by the murder itself, but especially by its coverage in the media.⁹ The behaviour of (then) Dutch Minister for Integration and Immigration Rita Verdonk in Morocco [when she made disparaging comments about Moroccan immigrants to the Netherlands] did not, alas, contribute positively.

The Importance of Longstanding Relations

The Nieuwe Kerk never includes contemporary art in its exhibitions. Despite the strong wish of the Moroccan Ministry of Culture not to make such an artificial break in the exhibition of Morocco's art history, the Nieuwe Kerk did not give in, and finally the Moroccan Ministry of Culture requested me to make a supplementary exhibition of modern Moroccan art. The World Arts Museum in Rotterdam got this honorary task at the exclusion of more famous museums such as Boijmans van Beuningen and the Central Museum in Utrecht, because Moroccan decision-makers appreciated my longstanding involvement in contemporary arts of the Arab world.

Here I wish to stress the importance of long, structural relations with partners in the Middle East. No one will deny the importance of a polite, personal relationship-based way of working, but all too often I have seen great commercial and political interests destroyed because Western counterparts had neglected this vital strategic attitude.

So I had to make an exhibition of contemporary art. Knowing the sensitivity of the *Amazigh* (Berber) issue, I cooperated with Nijmegen and Amsterdam Universities in researching the Amazigh influence on the modern art scene in Morocco. But although visual symbols of the Amazigh tradition were depicted and recognized, Amazigh identity did not play any role whatsoever in what is considered the 'canon of contemporary art'. Among Moroccan intellectuals, in the Netherlands represented among others by Fouad Laroui, it simply was no issue. All of the renowned artists with whom I spoke regarded Amazigh artistic production as either popular art or as emancipating, at best political, instruments.¹⁰ That character of an activist art did not take it seriously. Indeed, its quality did not meet the standards of our exhibition concept. In spite of pressure from the Dutch-Moroccan Amazigh cultural organizations, I maintained this decision. In the exhibition's catalogue I justified my choice with arguments, but it was a disappointment

9) Criminologist Jan Dirk de Jong said: 'It is strange to give someone a different treatment because of his culture, especially now research proves that this does not play a large role in delinquent behaviour. Every form of cultural discrimination stirs up processes in which groups are labelled permanently as a minority. Get rid of this label "typically Moroccan"', quote translated from *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 23 November 2007, p. 11.

10) Not to be confused with the work of those artists, who were proud of their Amazigh origin, but did not wish their art to be classified accordingly.

for many.¹¹ In several Dutch newspapers, I was severely criticized that the exhibition showed only urban art: elite art that did not have any relation with the background of our Dutch-Moroccan community. Other newspapers did not even review the exhibition because 'they had already reviewed the exhibition of the Nieuwe Kerk, and that was enough Morocco' (I quote). To my defence, I hasten to add that the exhibition had excellent reviews in countries such as Spain and France, where the press is better acquainted with North African art. So be it.

Now, after two years, I can say that this affair did not negatively affect my relations with the Amazigh community. On the contrary, my credibility has benefited from my persistence to let artistic quality and facts prevail over social desires.

Let me finish this case with the remark that the Moroccan Ministry of Culture did not interfere with any choice of work that I wanted to include. At my special request, it was the first time that non-Moroccan nationals participated in an official representation of contemporary art from Morocco. Later, the Netherlands Embassy in Rabat informed me that the Moroccan Minister of Culture, Mohamed Achaari, had been complimented officially by King Mohammed VI. Since then, the Dutch Rabat Embassy has forwarded many requests from the Netherlands through the offices of the Moroccan Ministry of Culture.

The Example of Iran

The Arts as an Effective Support for International Relations

I continue with a more innocent example, - but concerning a political hot spot: Iran.¹²

Although Iran is generally considered the 'Italy' of the Middle East, I had never been there. This was because of the Islamic Revolution during my student days, then the Gulf Wars. However, the collection of the World Arts Museum Rotterdam was rich in Iranian heritage, and I created many exhibitions featuring Iranian objects.¹³

11) Charlotte Huygens, 'Marokko, hedendaagse kunst en design, en een nieuwe rol voor het Wereldmuseum Rotterdam', in Charlotte Huygens (ed.), *Marokko: Kunst en Design 2005* (Rotterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2005), also published in Arabic.

12) Obviously, neither Iran nor Turkey (in the next case) belong to the Arab World. Historically, curators and scholars of Arts and the Islamic World have had to cover these different areas. Unfortunately, after '9/11', the complexity of the Islamic world has gained new relevance.

13) Most exhibitions did not have catalogues. The choice of important objects from Iran is depicted in Charlotte Huygens and Fred Ros (eds), *Dreaming of Paradise: Islamic Art from the Collection of the Museum of Ethnology Rotterdam* (Rotterdam: Martial & Snoeck, 1993), also published in Dutch.

The presentations of Iranian heritage took place at times when the museum also had Iraqi exhibitions on show. This did not stop Iranian visitors – it may even have formed an additional reason for their visit. The feedback that they gave helped me to improve my knowledge of their Shi'ite background.

Our programme also attracted the interest of the Iranian Embassy in the Netherlands, which came to see the presentations and took official guests to the museum. One thing led to another and I was invited to visit Iran by the Iranian Ministry of Culture, Islamic Guidance and Tourism. As in many other countries and especially outside Europe and the United States, culture and tourism are closely related. Tourism is an important factor for the national economy; the economic dimension of culture should never be underestimated. Arts thus served as my entrance to the country, and so, in 2005, I went to Iran. It was a trip that I will never forget. I was welcomed at the airport with flowers, and in every town, at every site and in every museum there was a welcoming committee to receive me and explain to me everything that I wished to know about the building, the restoration, the excavations, the cultural history, present function and more.

Beside the great cultural experience and the valuable information that I received, the visit was an eye-opener to me in more respects. You will understand that I am used to encountering innumerable sorts of prejudice in my field of work. In fact, it is one of the preconditions of doing my job that I must always be aware of them. But although I was prepared that Iran might not be exactly as it was depicted in our media, it struck me how deeply influenced I was by the biased image of Iran. Of course, it is characteristic of prejudice that you can always find it confirmed: yes, I had to wear a veil, and no, it is not a free country. But Iran is a cradle of civilization too, with 7,000 years of fascinating art history. I noticed that many veils were loosely wrapped around the back of the head, showing abundant black hair, and many long dresses were transparent, with high splits, and were tight, provocative. And then the young people I met – unmarried male and female students together, joining us for late nights out, communicating freely. It enabled me to have interesting exchanges of thought with many cultural actors. As one of them said prophetically: Iran does two steps forwards towards modernity and democracy, then one back again. Anyway, I got a treasure of information on almost every aspect of society, from many different sides. I saw more than I had dreamed possible. Even in very orthodox places like the mosque in Qom, for which friends had warned me that people spit at the ground for foreigners, the religious guards went home to borrow the chador of their sister to enable me to visit. The key to all of this hospitality was my Iranian hostess, who continuously assured everybody of my genuine interest, and we cannot rule out the official framework of my visit.

I returned home with lots of new impressions and ideas. Shortly after that, the Netherlands Embassy in Tehran received a prize for the best promotion of Dutch trade. But not a single Dutch company ever approached

us, or as far as I know any other museum, to discuss the role that ‘culture’ could play in paving new ways into this isolated country. Before I joined the museum world, I worked as a manager in economic relations between the Netherlands and the Middle East. I know from proper business experience how much goodwill it creates when a company – or a country for that matter – shows that it is interested in the cultural background of its relation, interested in more than just achieving the goal of a certain project. There is much to gain here from cooperation with cultural institutions.

To end this case of Iran, I now work for the National Museum of Antiquities and have just visited Iran on its behalf. Given the relations that I had already established, I simply renewed the contacts to do the job. (It may interest you to learn that in the three years between my visits, under a more conservative regime, many more people now have internet access, can receive satellite television and have a mobile telephone with international range. Yet one should not ignore other signals.)

Not a Crisis Tool, but Structural Support for International Cultural Exchange

Arts can Play a Role that Neither Trade nor Politics Can

While the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is aiming at expanding its cultural diplomacy, I advocate active support for those cultural institutions that structurally maintain relations with other countries and continents. Many commercial companies do not have the capacity to support relations throughout the world. In the political field, actual power relations may – and indeed do – prevent structurally maintaining contacts with opposing powers. Diplomats, I need not tell you, have many formalities to observe, but cultural institutions usually have more freedom. The cultural, the artistic, world, by nature functions best when it is functioning apart from economic and political factors. Those contacts are seldom swayed by the issues of the day.

It is therefore my plea that cultural institutions should be better equipped to play an international role: for most museums, theatres and other cultural producers, this just means sufficient financial support to do their job. Furthermore, it urgently requires a more generous visa policy for cultural producers, artists and art critics, for intellectuals and students. It requires hospitality. Cultural diplomacy can support cultural institutions to this aim, while diplomacy will vice versa be greatly supported by cultural institutions.

In this regard, I also wish to stress the necessity of reciprocity, a continuous respect of mutual benefit. Let me give you an example. The Dutch Ministry of Culture just wrote a letter to the National Council of Culture, where I am a member of the Museums Committee. It requested views on which fields of culture we thought suitable to promote abroad – as if they were common export goods. The Ministry did not pose the question of

how we could promote cultural exchange, or improve cultural interaction; it did not even ask which role Dutch museums were playing in the promotion of international relations, or how to improve this.

The reflex to think one way is deeply rooted, but it will not support any relationship in the long run. Especially when relations are under pressure, one-way actions are seldom effective. Governments tend to turn to cultural institutions in situations of crisis, but they easily forget to support the cultural sector structurally in its international policy.

The Turkish Case: The Turkish Art exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam

The Precarious Balance between Arts and Politics

It is not always a smooth relationship between the art world and politics, to put it mildly. It is a precarious balance between political interests on the one side, and artistic and scientific autonomy on the other. If you were in the Netherlands during 2007, you cannot have missed the news about the censored catalogue of the Istanbul exhibition at the Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam.¹⁴ It was an affair that caused great public commotion. I was engaged in this project as a guest curator, and provide here a brief survey of what happened, the insight that I gained and some recommendations.

The Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam scheduled an exhibition of Turkish heritage at the end of 2006. A great example was the exhibition on 'Turks' in London, but that was too big even for the Nieuwe Kerk to house.¹⁵ By September 2005, I was asked to take part in a mission to Turkey, together with the Director of the Nieuwe Kerk, its Head of Exhibitions and a prominent captain of industry, who knew Turkey well. One year for the preparation of an exhibition at that level is short. We further had the disadvantage that a number of old museum colleagues had just been replaced or retired, and many major Istanbul museums had new directors. This caused considerable delay in defining the concept, the selection of works, and therefore the signature of the contracts. Because of this, no larger publications from these directors were included in the catalogue, although many shorter contributions from Turkish curators were. Apart from the texts on the objects, we had planned several longer background articles. They would follow the concept of the exhibition (namely, a city tour through Ottoman Istanbul) and go deeper into Dutch-Turkish relations.

14) Marlies Kleiterp and Charlotte Huygens (eds), *Istanbul: The City and the Sultan* (Amsterdam: Stichting Winkel – De Nieuwe Kerk, 2006), also published in Dutch.

15) 'Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600-1600', exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2005, with catalogue.

Contracts with national museums in the Middle East are always on the level of the national government. There is no decentralized structure for museums in their foreign relations. Usually both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are involved, which is a complexity in itself. Anyway, shortly before the opening of the exhibition, all lists of objects were finally approved, but not yet the contracts. So the director of the Nieuwe Kerk went off to Ankara to settle affairs and to present the catalogue. Unfortunately, this visit took place just in the period when France was approving its declaration on the genocide of the Armenian community, and the controversy had its effects on Dutch national politics as well.¹⁶ You may remember the violent reaction from Ankara, as it is now reacting to a similar declaration in the US. This framework had a severe effect on communication. All of the catalogue's texts were scrutinized in Turkey. Every paragraph with the word Armenian in it was blocked; in the case of my own article, even Armenian clay was not allowed. Other sensitive issues were censored as well, even though Turkish sources were quoted. Whatever role the Dutch Embassy in Ankara played, the Turkish position was non-negotiable. The Nieuwe Kerk had no choice but to go back to the authors and inform them of Ankara's decisions. One of the authors principally refused to cooperate any longer. Others did not object. What should be done? The Armenian massacre did not play a role in the exhibition, because, as I mentioned before, the Nieuwe Kerk never includes work of this later period. But since the Armenian issue was on the public agenda, we had deemed it important to address it in the background information of the catalogue. Only one author refused to accept the Turkish changes. However, since the articles were interrelated, the Nieuwe Kerk – after intense consideration – decided to withdraw all of the articles and to publish the captions of the objects with only the most obligatory short introductions. The sole other option would have been to cancel the exhibition altogether. This would have meant a temporary end to the core business of the Nieuwe Kerk, which is not an organization that can fall back on state subsidy. It is impossible to organize another exhibition at such short notice. In order to publish the articles anyhow, the Nieuwe Kerk offered all of the articles to the magazine *ZemZem*, with which it had cooperated previously. While *ZemZem* did not accept the offer, the magazine sought publicity with the news that the Nieuwe Kerk had been censored.¹⁷ Coverage in the media was merciless. The Nieuwe Kerk sent several rectifications to the publications of the least true articles, but could not react to all. On the internet, the decision of the Nieuwe Kerk also met with little understanding.¹⁸

16) Several chosen candidates for the Dutch Parliament, of Turkish origin, resigned either because they did not wish to take a stand in this matter, or because their standpoint did not meet the consent of their parties.

17) Jurgen Maas and Annemarike Stremmelaar, 'De Turkse schaar', *ZemZem*, vol. 1, 2007, pp. 6-7.

18) For an overview of publications, please refer to the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam.

Much aggression was focused against Turkey and Turkey's possible entry into the EU, and against multicultural society, rather than being directly related to the Nieuwe Kerk. Contrarily, other criticism was that the Nieuwe Kerk did not stress enough the position of minorities in Turkey, even though the presentation treated their status and influence as an introduction to all other subjects.

It struck me that not a single comment offered any alternatives as to what the Nieuwe Kerk should have done, except those that would indeed have cancelled the whole presentation. 'Should have tried harder to make the Turkish government change its opinion' was the suggestion of the concerned journalist of *ZemZem*. The very fact that other countries are entitled to stick to their own version of their own history was not an argument. One notable exception to this attitude was an article commenting on the state visit of Queen Beatrix to Istanbul, taking place at the same time as the exhibition. It was written by former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot in the *Volkskrant* under the heading: 'Sometimes You Achieve More with Honey...'¹⁹

I will not be so arrogant as to offer advice on how to prevent such situations. They cannot always be prevented. But I learned a lesson of basic PR: if such a sensitive affair happens, go to the media yourself, directly, with your side of the story and all of the arguments for your actions.

Let me assure you that I am vehemently opposed to all state interference in any publication. But I did not withdraw from the project. I did not even cancel my introduction to the catalogue. After sleepless nights, I decided that just as in business, international cooperation is always a matter of giving and taking. We may cherish our academic and artistic freedoms, but other countries do not, or let other considerations prevail. Whenever one decides to cooperate with those countries on governmental levels, as is always the case when one cooperates with national museums, one enters a two-way relationship, a relationship that is based on equality – and therefore negotiation. If a common catalogue is published, a condition for most exhibition projects, then it must reflect acceptable points of view for both parties. My personal challenge for future projects will be to stipulate an agreement containing the statement that all texts are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the involved governments. Such a statement is common in scientific publications, where the editor does not take responsibility for the contribution of the authors.

The Cultural World: A Powerful Basis for Civil Society Development

To conclude, it is worthwhile to make international cultural productions. And it is more interesting to cooperate with foreign experts than just to follow

19) *Volkskrant*, 26 February 2007, p. 2.

one's own perceptions and reflect one's own ideas.²⁰ This demands great effort, as I have tried to show. But the profit is also great, not only for art lovers, but in the end for society as a whole.

As a cultural producer, I do not think that it is the priority of our cultural institutions to make governments change their minds about national issues. I believe that it is our mission to make interesting cultural presentations: exhibitions, performances and cultural debates; presentations that cross borders; presentations that offer new perspectives and create new meeting places.²¹

But this does not mean that cultural contacts are non-committal, or do not contribute to change. Let us remember that artists and writers, those at the heart of the cultural world, are self-willed, unamenable people. We can think of Erasmus, Spinoza, Picasso and his 'Guernica': their urge for artistic and intellectual freedom has greatly contributed to social innovation. Those intellectuals have their successors in today's Middle East too. Many civil rights' movements started in the cultural sector. Those who demand freedom of expression will claim general freedom. They need an open society. The cultural world forms a powerful civil basis for international relations and dialogue.

I therefore hope and wish that the cultural exchange that we support may also help to promote our ideals of worldwide freedom of expression and civil liberty.

20) In order to deal with cultural pluralism with professional integrity, I drafted a code of conduct for cultural organizations. It has just been published and is available for those interested. See Charlotte Huygens, 'Nederlandse musea en culturele diversiteit', *cULTUUR*, tweede jrg, 2006, pp. 95-96.

21) See also Charlotte Huygens, 'Multiplicity: Euro-Med Relations in Contemporary Artistic Creation' (Amsterdam: Euro-Med Reflection Group of the European Dialogue Foundation, 2006), available online at <http://medreflection.eurocult.org>.

Beyond Building Bridges: A New Direction for Culture and Development

Neila Akrimi¹

The role of culture and intercultural dialogue in bridging gaps towards development raises several crucial questions: What are the cultural gaps? Why has culture recently been perceived as a means to development? What would happen if culture was placed closer to the heart of decision-making in society? But above all, ‘what is dialogue all about?’ This question could easily be rephrased as, ‘why hold dialogue?’ or, even more challengingly, ‘who should be involved in dialogue?’

These fundamental questions reflect the complexity of the subject matter. In order to address them, my approach would be to challenge the notion and try to reconstruct some pieces of the puzzle. To review the conceptual framework would be the first focus of my presentation. A common understanding of some key concepts while dealing with this complex topic is very important. What do we mean by culture, intercultural dialogue, cultural policy and development?

In order to bring this analysis to a concrete ground and to avoid the trap of abstraction, I present the case of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). The EMP, also referred to as the Barcelona Process, was launched at

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a Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers' meeting in Barcelona in November 1995, although it built on a long period of EU cooperation with, and assistance to, the Union's Mediterranean neighbours, going back to the 1970s. The aims of the EMP extend well beyond economics, with broad goals including political stability, strengthening cultural ties, and protecting the environment. I consider here only the economic component of the EMP, the main objective of which was 'the construction of a zone of shared prosperity'.²

This dimension is of great importance because any observer of Mediterranean reality will confirm that it is here that we are confronted with one of the most profound and probably also most significant divisions separating the north and the south of our globe.

What Do We Mean by 'Culture' and Intercultural Dialogue?

When we talk about 'culture', we often mean intellectual and creative products, including literature, music, drama and painting. Another use of 'culture' is to describe the beliefs and practices of another society, particularly where these are seen as closely linked with tradition or religion. But culture is more than that. 'Culture [...] is [...] the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs'.³

Cultural policies worldwide therefore need to develop a broader meaning rather than the current narrow focus on the arts, promoting and fostering creativity in politics and governance and encouraging multicultural activities.

Dialogue, as such, serves and enhances intercultural communication by providing an opportunity for discussion involving representatives of various religions and cultures. The overlap of the intercultural and the interreligious in the approaching dialogue is unavoidable, as is the greater attention given so far to the religious dimension. Religion and culture are inextricably entwined.

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue makes for respect for other cultures, exchange, confidence and mutual acknowledgment, and provides the opportunity to share differences. At the same time, these forms of dialogue are seen as 'ever more essential tools for human development and peace building', in that they facilitate and establish peaceful and creative contact between peoples of various religions and with different beliefs, cultural and spiritual traditions, values and world visions. The concept of intercultural dialogue was often used but rarely defined. The concept of

2) Barcelona Declaration, adopted at the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, 27-28 November 1995; see http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/euromed/bd.htm.

3) See UNESCO website on culture and development, available online at http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/mexico/html_eng/page1.htm.

dialogue suggests something rather more specific than mere conversation, or even the diplomatic negotiations of the international community, when it is associated with the word ‘intercultural’.⁴

The prefix ‘inter’ indicates a programme: there is an explicit or implicit agenda. In so far as the dialogue is between religions and/or cultures, the agenda is one of improving relations. This is to be achieved through broader and deeper mutual understanding with the aim, at least, of ensuring that religions or cultures are no longer sources of conflict and, at best, of making them contribute actively to the construction of integrated pluralist societies and the development of a ‘culture of peace’. The point of the dialogue is, somewhat ironically, to encourage religions and cultures to become the instruments of peace, which they often claim to be, all too often even as their adherents are busy fomenting conflict. However, dialogue in this sense is not a modern invention. Intercultural dialogue is in a way at the core of all human history – even though very few people knew that this was what they were engaged in until the word came into fashion in recent decades.

But the need for respect for all cultures is particularly urgent at a time when the uneasy acceptance of global culture and reactions against the alienating effects of large-scale modern technologies are reflected in the fast spread of religious fundamentalism and social intolerance. Globalization and migration mean that no community can live in isolation any longer: cultural and religious pluralism enters through migration, travel, trade, the media and the internet.

Why Do We Need Culture?

The straightforward answer to the question ‘Why culture?’ as a trajectory to development is therefore that culture (in its broadest meaning) conveys a sense of belonging to and of shared ownership that is the glue of social relations. It defines a space within which its members share or negotiate common views, values and visions. This is not to deny that differences among cultures have often been politically orchestrated to legitimize aspirations of supremacy and acts of domination by economic or military power.

There is an obvious need and human desire for dialogue, regardless of the great uncertainty and various prejudices stemming from ignorance. According to an international survey conducted by UNESCO, there are two major reasons for organizing such dialogue: the fact that conflicts involve cultural and religious issues, that ‘cultural and religious issues are significant factors within violent conflicts in our society worldwide’ and, consequently, that such ‘dialogue is urgent’; and the need to understand human behaviour,

4) See ‘An International Survey on Education and Teaching of Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue (1999-2001)’, online at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127158e.pdf>.

that ‘once we understand different cultures and beliefs, it becomes easier to understand human behaviour. [Such] dialogue should have an ethical orientation’.

Emphasis is placed on culture as a means of human growth and empowerment and the recognition that in order to achieve a sustainable development, economic, financial and social reforms have to be addressed from a cultural perspective. The notion of cultural development is based on the idea that culture and development are closely interlinked, since all kinds of evolution, including human and economic, are ultimately determined by cultural factors.

Central to this approach is the idea that culture constitutes the very basis of human development and it should not therefore be regarded purely as a means of promoting and sustaining material progress, nor as a commodity, but as a valuable aim in itself. If development is to be understood as human growth, then policy and governance have to be based on global ethical values and agreed-upon democratic principles, such as the respect for diversity and the promotion of creativity, participation and cultural freedom.

The time has now come to build a coherent new paradigm, one in which society’s different actors together mould paths of human development that are sensitive to all the cultural issues and fully recognize them as such. This is what cultural policy must ultimately come to mean.

But How Do We Do This? How to Enhance Culture as a Means for Development through Policies?

In order to accommodate effectively a notion of cultural development that stresses the ethical values of cultural freedom, respect for diversity and the centrality of the creative processes as a means for social and cultural development, cultural policies worldwide need to develop a broader meaning rather than the current narrow focus on the arts, through promoting and fostering creativity in politics and governance and encouraging multicultural activities.

The Europeans, through reports and new organizations, have been working to create a fundamental shift in the political and public consciousness of what culture is, and to analyse its relationship to development. They have been working to connect all of the different cultural policies and to consider them from a new point of departure. How is this working out with the southern borders of the EU, where intercultural dialogue has all the meaning and justification to be developed into policy for the purpose of reconstructing bridges over the Mediterranean? Obviously, the problems are huge today concerning the future development of peace, stability and freedom in the region. But the goal is clear, namely to reduce the divisions, lack of understanding and the disparities – whether economic, political or cultural.

Identifying the Cultural Gaps?

In today's difficult times, which are characterized by an uncertain international political and economic situation as well as by the resurgence of religious and theocratic elements, the dialogue between cultures and civilizations is the best essential matrix for shaping the Euro-Mediterranean project as a whole. These challenges are well known. They exist simultaneously in the political, economic, cultural and environmental domains.

Since the early 1950s, the Mediterranean has been a constant victim of sometimes-radical tensions between the Arab-Islamic and Western worlds. This tension is because of the effects of decolonization but also the economic and social differences prevailing in the region, which have become increasingly visible. Worse yet, the persistence of conflicts in the Middle East and the absence of a peace perspective may lead to very serious problems in the sense of a 'cultural clash' between the Arab-Muslim and the Christian Western worlds. The 11 September 2001 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have had such an 'emotionalizing' impact that they have attracted almost all of the attention.

The outlook on both sides is currently shaped by prejudices, terrorism and war. In this context, the southern Mediterranean and more particularly the Arab world has become the subject of a certain fixation and of a number of manipulations in the political field and in the media, leading to frequent misunderstandings of all kinds.

The idea of an 'Islamic menace' has again been taken up by certain political circles in the West and used for creating anxieties. Actually, with the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, certain political circles in the West launched assumptions and fantastic speculations according to which 'green Islamism' nowadays constitutes the new menace that is directed against the Western capitalist world, in lieu of 'red communism'. In other words, while in the past the West had used Islam as an ideological defence mechanism against atheistic communism, with the latter having disappeared, Islam is now itself being called a potentially expansionist instrument. It is in this context that the famous book by Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations*, was published, opposing Islam and Confucianism against the West.

North/South contrasts abound. The Mediterranean basin, as an important border area between two worlds, reflects the great differences that exist between the North and the South, which lead to imbalances on several levels. The growth of such disparities holds the risk of greatly endangering stability and welfare in the entire region. The demographic change and South-North migratory flows in the Mediterranean region are issues that emerge in all their complexities from the general set of Mediterranean challenges. They

have become dominant themes on both shores of the Mediterranean for both the official debate and civil society.

This means that awareness of the importance of the issue of transnational migration flows must be increased in times of globalization and of pictures transmitted via satellite. Furthermore, if differences between the inhabitants on both shores of the Mediterranean became too pronounced, this would certainly be dangerous for freedom and would substantially limit the exemplary nature of a 'Europe of citizens' that was founded on the principles of human rights, tolerance and democracy. There is therefore much at stake.

Intercultural Dialogue and the Euro-Mediterranean Model of Development?

Given the complex and often confrontational relations between Western and Muslim-influenced societies, and despite mixed experiences to date, dialogue with the goal of fostering better understanding of each other should not be abandoned but instead strengthened. This gives rise to the question of what approach is best to render such a dialogue effective and fruitful. Such a form of interaction is indeed possible, but requires all sides to show greater openness and to make greater efforts.

Dialogue is only possible if both sides desist above all from pointing the finger at the other and from presuming that their own ways of thinking and practices are self-evident. Dialogue must, in other words, also open your own ways of thought and intellectual preconditions for debate. Self-reflection and critique are central components of any dialogue; what counts is to try and find shared standards that do not solely correspond to your own prejudices and cultural traditions, be they Western or Muslim.

Finally, intercultural dialogue should not misunderstand its own reach: it must understand its own limits and conditions, and take these into account. Dialogue can only take place as an (admittedly important) auxiliary function and cannot of itself solve the crisis in Western-Muslim relations. Dialogue must, if it is to have any chance at all, substantially consider the politics and power relations of both sides and discuss them too.

In this quest for a new model for North/South cultural relations, it seems important to deal with the 'Andalusian model'. In the part of southern Europe called Andalusia, a brilliant civilization developed for centuries that influenced the Maghreb area, Spain and even Sicily. In Andalusia, certain centres such as Seville, Cordoba, Granada and Toledo were the hubs from where cultural exchange with the Christian world took place. To revive the Andalusian dream – which stood for values such as tolerance and friendship between Muslims, Jews and Christians – should be the 'action platform' for today and tomorrow, in order to bridge the gap in understanding.

Even if cultural relations between Europe and the Arab world still fall short of expectations, it should be tried by all means to elucidate

misunderstandings between cultures, and to identify positive signs and elements of dialogue between cultures and religions. 'Living in peace in a diversified world' should be the motto.

One of the objectives to be reached would be to arrive at improving mutual perception; better yet, at rediscovering each other in the framework of a new, more sincere and more open approach to their cultural dialogue. It is essential to dissipate the misunderstandings, to appease passions and to open the door to hope through new policies. In order for it to be successful, it will be necessary to mobilize all the vital forces on both sides of the Mediterranean, to undertake a fundamental socio-economic and cultural effort. Today, and in the future, civil society is an important element that is both able to abandon the diehard (intransigent) thinking patterns concerning North/South relations and to overcome blocked situations.

However, it takes much more than just high-minded agreements between governments on both sides of the Mediterranean to weave a robust and resilient carpet of intercultural dialogue. In this respect, mobilizing civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean relating to the project and the agenda set down is essential and constitutes the pillar on which any project for reconstructing the Mediterranean edifice should stand. It is manifestly extremely difficult to bring the differences in interests and policies of the various governments involved into line with one another in the short or medium term in an effort to overcome the crisis in relations. For this reason, civil society should participate to ease at least the political-psychological situation and to help reduce mutual prejudices.

In addition, it will be necessary to obtain a genuine economic take-off to increase trade and investment levels substantially. A new commercial dynamism, underpinned by a high level of economic growth, is the essential condition for creating a Euro-Mediterranean economic area that is not merely limited to the North-South axis but extends along the entire southern shore of the Mediterranean.

As to the best solution to combat the negative impact of migration, this consists of cooperating in order to manage the problem together. Preventive measures and consultation and coordination mechanisms have to be put in place while paying great attention to specific aspects and adopting programmes that aim to limit the phenomenon. The years to come will also be marked by the future of the approximately 15 million immigrants of southern Mediterranean origin established in Europe, who over time are becoming an essential component of Europe's socio-economic landscape. Europe has to choose between two alternatives: to retract behind isolation and thus worsen the fate of immigrant populations; or to become a responsible partner of the southern neighbours in an international framework permeated by humanitarian principles and respect for freedom and human rights.

Will the EU be able to Formulate and Enact a Foreign Policy?

There are many commendable activities, initiated and supported by private foundations, national governments and transnational institutions and agencies, as well as the EU, to strengthen the cooperation and dialogue among artists, intellectuals and cultural operators on a pan-European level. Individually, they all make sense and pursue meaningful goals; but seen in their entirety, one often cannot help feeling that these are but dispersed activities, more a symbolic gesture than a well-articulated and consistent effort.

This is in no way a criticism of the individual donors; it is just to indicate the deficiency of a common direction that could considerably augment the impact of the now more or less insulated projects. For very good reasons, all eyes turn to Brussels when it comes to proposing such a common direction.

But unfortunately the EU is still lacking an explicit and coordinated cultural foreign policy, despite the pronouncements and programmes that address culture as a valid dimension of European integration and of the EU's relations to third countries. However, these programmes seem to be of marginal relevance compared to the 'big issues' of security, trade and migration, etc. To put it differently, the potential for leverage of cultural diplomacy has not yet been fully realized by the EU. Present EU programmes in support of social and economic development in neighbouring countries do not explicitly include culture as a programme objective. Openly defining the terms under which culture can be funded as part of these programmes would go a long way in clarifying EU policies with regard to culture; it would also help in determining the actual level of EU investment in international cultural cooperation.

Enhancing a Culture of Dialogue

Will the EU be able to formulate and enact a foreign policy towards Islamic countries that is constructive, non-confrontational, but still firm in its principles of adhering to freedom of expression, civil liberties and tolerance?

We believe that the plurality of cultures is one of the most precious assets of the Euro-Mediterranean region to be safeguarded and preserved. Talking about best practices, the EU is a model for the use of cultural diversity to build unity. In other words, as much as the EU came to strengthen the 'hard sector' of the European economy, at the same time it also fostered the 'soft sector' that relates to the civic dimensions of European integration, or the social and cultural cohesion among EU citizens. Such is the persuasive logic of 'unity in diversity'. But the aim of the EU to export its model of cultural integration would ignore the specificity of the Mediterranean. Again, as in the founding days of the European Union, common interests should serve as the

catalyst to overcome old divisions. In this context, cultural and educational cooperation across our common borders contributes to a pan-Euro-Mediterranean cultural space of shared values.

Cultural policy should be seen as central to the geopolitical agenda of the enlarged Europe, both from the perspective of the individual member states as well as of the EU. To bring this policy into focus, it would seem advisable to supplement the New Neighbourhood framework paper with a document that explicates the pivotal role of culture in broadening and deepening relations within the wider Europe.

The New Neighbourhood framework put forward by the Commission of the European Union represents a timely and thoughtful approach to considering the implications and opportunities of EU enlargement from a wider European perspective. However, there are still numerous obstacles that prevent enhanced cultural exchange and cooperation beyond the EU's new borders. But given the economic realities in countries beyond these borders, enhanced cultural cooperation cannot be expected unless the EU provides financial support as an investment in its own future, which promises rich dividends to be measured in scales of increased trust, tolerance, stability and cohesion.

The Mediterranean area is already, and will continue to be, a concrete testing ground for evaluating the success of dialogue between the North and the South, the East and the West. The core perspective of this contribution is a comprehensive approach to reshaping the intercultural dialogue: from a dialogue of cultures to a culture of dialogue.

Cultural Diplomacy: Hard to Define, But You'd Know It If You Saw It¹

Ambassador Cynthia P. Schneider²

Introduction

You see I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts. But it is an enthusiasm of which I am not ashamed, as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world and procure them its praise.

Thomas Jefferson's observation to James Madison, penned from Paris on 20 September 1785, still offers a good definition of cultural diplomacy. Jefferson, the statesman, scientist, and architect, recognized the potential for cultural expression to shape international opinion about the fledgling American republic. Over 200 years later in the post-'9/11' era of opinion polls, Jefferson's argument remains relevant.³

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- 1) Reprinted with permission from the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 13.1, Fall/Winter 2006.
 - 2) Ph.D., Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy, Georgetown University.
 - 3) For a summary and analysis of the data collected by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes project, see Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World* (New York: Times Books, 2006). For the most recent polling report, see Pew Research Center, 'America's Image Slips, But Allies Share US Concerns Over Iran, Hamas,' Pew Global Attitudes Project, available online at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252e> (accessed 12 July 2006). For earlier reports, see Pew Research Center, 'America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties', 18 March 2003, at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=175> (accessed 12 July 2006); and

Today, as in the eighteenth century, many proposals for improving international relations emphasize public diplomacy interactions between states other than those conducted between national governments and beyond traditional diplomacy. Since 11 September 2001 public diplomacy has emerged as a much discussed, if little understood, component of foreign policy. Most reports issued in the last four years focus on improving process and structure at the expense of content,⁴ and tend to neglect the role of cultural diplomacy, with the exception of the commendable but largely ignored report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy.⁵ Public diplomacy consists of all that a nation does to explain itself to the world, and cultural diplomacy – the use of creative expression and exchanges of ideas, information and people to increase mutual understanding – supplies much of its content.⁶

If US public diplomacy is measured according to the three ‘strategic imperatives’ put forward by US Under-Secretary of State Karen Hughes in testimony before the House Committee on International Relations – to offer a vision of hope, to isolate and marginalize violent extremists, and to foster a sense of common interest and values – then the report card is mixed at best. The image of the United States has declined steadily over the last five years, in the Muslim world as well as in Europe and Canada,⁷ and US citizens are increasingly viewed in the same negative light as US policies.⁸

Discussions of the United States’s declining image inevitably turn to public diplomacy. However, the expectation that public diplomacy can somehow repair the damage caused by unpopular policies is unreasonable, and at odds with the goals of increasing understanding and building relationships and trust. Experience has shown that using public diplomacy as

Pew Research Center, ‘Views of a Changing World 2003’, 3 June 2003, at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185> (accessed 12 July 2006). Gallup has released preliminary results of a poll of one billion Muslims; see Meredith Buel, ‘New Poll of Islamic World Says Most Muslims Reject Terrorism’, *Voice of America*, 2 May 2006, at <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-05-02.voa82.cfm?CFID=7176751&CFTOKEN=55381572> (accessed 14 June 2006).

- 4) For a summary of the reports and their recommendations, see Susan B. Epstein and Lisa Mages, ‘Public Diplomacy: A Review of Past Recommendations’, CRS Report for Congress (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 2005).
- 5) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, ‘Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Diplomacy’ (Washington DC: US Department of State, 2005), at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/54374.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2006).
- 6) The definition of cultural diplomacy is taken from Milton C. Cummings Jr, Ph.D., *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey* (Washington DC: Center for Arts and Culture, 2003), p. 1; cited also in Cynthia Schneider, *Diplomacy that Works: ‘Best Practices’ in Cultural Diplomacy* (Washington DC: Center for Arts and Culture, 2003), at <http://www.culturalpolicy.org/pdf/Schneider.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2006).
- 7) Kohut and Stokes, *America Against the World*, pp. 27-29, and ref. note 1.
- 8) Kohut and Stokes, *America Against the World*, pp. 29-30.

a rapid response tactic tends only to alienate foreign publics even further. For example, a South-East Asian diplomat told of a US library that had opened six times during the 1960s, always in response to crisis. Each time the crisis abated, the library was shut down.⁹ According to one Egyptian diplomat:

Cultural diplomacy emerges at times of crisis. But this should be a process of building bridges, not a one-way street. Developing respect for others and their way of thinking – this is what cultural diplomacy does.¹⁰

The surge of interest in public diplomacy since '9/11' reveals that in the United States public diplomacy is still primarily used as a response to crises. This article will examine aspects of the public diplomacy response to the crisis of 11 September 2001 and will ask the following questions: What are the roles of public and cultural diplomacy today, and what should they be? Recognizing that world opinion will always be significantly shaped by policy, how can cultural diplomacy increase understanding between the United States and other countries and cultures, specifically the Arab and Muslim world? Following a short review of past successful cultural diplomacy efforts, this study will consider the challenges of cultural diplomacy with the Muslim world today and will suggest potential strategies for the future.

Hot Jazz in the Cold War

Cultural diplomacy saw its heyday during the Cold War, when the United States armed itself with jazz, abstract expressionism, and modern literature. In the late 1950s more than 100 acts were sent to 89 countries in four years. Musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker brought abstract concepts of liberty to life by democratizing their concerts and insisting that ordinary people, not just elites, be allowed to listen. They departed on tours of one to two months, playing in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria and many other Muslim countries, as well as in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

During this time American Cultural Centers thrived in many capitals of the Islamic world, from Alexandria to Aleppo. Professor Samer Shehata of Georgetown University recalls that the American Cultural Center in Alexandria, Egypt, was where he learned about Jefferson and Lincoln.¹¹ In post-Second World War Germany, Marshall Plan funds contributed to building more than 80 Centers, sowing the seeds of goodwill throughout the

9) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 'Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Democracy', p. 12.

10) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 'Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Democracy'.

11) Remarks at a cultural diplomacy conference entitled 'Communicating with the World: Diplomacy that Works', Georgetown University, 30 April 2003.

country. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, these Centers were shut down. The short-sighted belief that cultural outreach had outlived its purpose, combined with the anti-arts movement in Congress (spearheaded by Jesse Helms) led to the elimination of much of the cultural programming, and ultimately the dissolution of the United States Information Agency (USIA) itself. By showcasing the attributes of a free society so effectively, cultural diplomacy had made itself obsolete, or so many thought. Warnings of the long-term dangers of diminishing cultural diplomacy by Walter Laqueur, among others, went unheeded:

Nor can it seriously be argued – as some have – that these tools of US foreign policy are no longer needed now that the Cold War is over and America no longer faces major threats [...] far from being on the verge of a new order, the world has entered a period of great disorder. In facing these new dangers, a re-examination of old priorities is needed. Cultural diplomacy, in the widest sense, has increased in importance, whereas traditional diplomacy and military power [...] are of limited use in coping with most of these dangers.¹²

In 1994, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Laqueur's words may have sounded alarmist; a dozen years later they appear all too prescient.

Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy succeeded during the Cold War in part because it allowed and even fostered dissent. Artists, actors, musicians and writers in any culture act as the national conscience, reflecting, often critically, on society. Andras Simonyi, Hungarian Ambassador to the United States, and himself a rock musician, commented:

Rock and roll was the internet of the '60s and early '70s. It was the carrier of the message of freedom [...] Rock and roll, culturally speaking, was a decisive element in loosening up communist societies and bringing them closer to a world of freedom.¹³

That the United States permitted critical voices as part of government-sponsored performances and emissaries astonished audiences everywhere, particularly behind the Iron Curtain. During a visit to the former Soviet Union, American author Norman Cousins was asked if US writers would not be punished for criticizing the government openly. He surprised his Soviet interlocutor by countering that any government official who complained

12) Walter Laqueur, 'Save Public Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 5, 1994, p. 20.

13) Bill Nichols, 'How Rock n' Roll Freed the World', *USA Today*, 6 November 2003.

about their criticism would be more likely to encounter difficulties.¹⁴ Another American writer recalled the impact of the exchanges as follows:

What I sensed they got out of visiting American writers was, to them, our spectacular freedom to speak our minds. I mean, there we were, official representatives of the US – sort of the equivalent of their Writers Union apparatchiks – who had no party line at all [...] and who had the writers' tendency to speak out on controversial issues [...] In other words, the exchanges enabled Soviet writers, intellectuals, students, *et al.*, to see that the 'free world' wasn't just political cant.¹⁵

Voices of dissent have been notably absent in more recent attempts to instil ideas of democracy in the Arab and Muslim world. Diplomats such as Under-Secretary Hughes have discussed democracy all over the world, but audiences in undemocratic societies have had little tangible experience of what freedom of speech means in America. Outside the elite circles of the highly educated and well travelled, students and journalists in Arab and Muslim countries know little about anti-war sentiments and protests in America.¹⁶

The current administrative structure for public and cultural diplomacy – as a bureau within the State Department – compromises the independence of cultural diplomacy, which is essential to its credibility. Cultural diplomacy was persuasive during the Cold War because its 'ambassadors' – performers, writers and thinkers – were perceived to be independent of the government. From the first discussions about public diplomacy by the Creel Committee in 1917-1919, through the creation in 1953 and dismantling in 1999 of USIA, and even in the reports and commissions of the last five years, the merits of housing public diplomacy activities inside or outside the State Department have been debated.¹⁷ Recently, the Report of the Advisory Committee on

14) See Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 158. On Soviet reactions to encounters with American freedoms, see Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: the Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).

15) Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, p. 154, quoting Ted Solotaroff.

16) Conversation with Liza Chambers, 14 June 2006. Information about students comes from the *Soliya* programme; see <http://www.soliya.net/am> (accessed 15 July 2006). *Soliya* is an organization that brings US and Muslim students from around the world together for virtual discussions, exemplifying how the internet can be put to creative use to bridge gaps and increase understanding.

17) On the history of cultural diplomacy in the United States, see Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Dulles VA: Potomac Books, 2005), esp. pp. 27-74 and 264-337. On the 'independence' – or not – of cultural affairs, see also Charles Frankel, *The Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1965); and Hans Tuch (ed.), *Communicating with the World in the 1990s* (Washington DC: USIA Alumni Association and the Public Diplomacy Foundation, 1994).

Cultural Diplomacy to the US Secretary of State recommended an 'independent clearinghouse, in the manner of the British Council'.¹⁸

Other countries realize the importance of an arm's-length relationship between a cultural presence and the government. For example, although both the British Council and the Goethe Institute are funded by the British and German governments respectively, they operate independently. According to an official with the British Council, 'we're not prepared to accept the Foreign Office's message for short-term political gain, because that would undermine our credibility'.¹⁹ US diplomats also understand that public diplomacy initiatives are more effective if they are perceived as separate from any goal of advancing specific policy objectives. A Foreign Service officer, quoted on the condition of anonymity, stated: 'public diplomacy is not really about getting things in the press. It's about long-term engagement. It can't be just about supporting the policy – it has to be deeper than that'.²⁰

The damage to the United States's reputation from the revelations of atrocities and injustices at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay has further crippled public and cultural diplomacy.²¹ Serious cracks have emerged in the United States's image as a model for 'a positive vision of hope and opportunity', to quote Under-Secretary Karen Hughes. Hughes has described her work as a 'conversation' with the world, a conversation that begins by acknowledging flaws in our democracy and demonstrates a characteristic that distinguishes democratic countries: self-criticism. By increasing our accessibility, humility can help to build bridges with the rest of the world.

Common Values and Cultural Diplomacy

Fostering common values has been a key tenet of cultural diplomacy with the Muslim world from the immediate aftermath of '9/11' to the present. In her travels and speeches, Under-Secretary Hughes focuses on the common values of 'faith, family and social justice and responsibility'.²² While increasing understanding and establishing trust have always been fundamental to cultural diplomacy, campaigns to discover common values between the

18) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 'Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Democracy', pp. 14-15.

19) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 'Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Democracy', p. 15.

20) Nicholas Kravlev, 'Cultural Diplomacy Pays Off, Envoys Say', *Washington Times*, available online at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/world/20040322-123845-5820r.htm> (accessed 14 June 2006).

21) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 'Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Democracy', p. 22.

22) 'US Under-Secretary of State Pushes for More Interfaith Dialog', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 June 2006, available online at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/pint/soo6/o6/b37ec268-416a-4591-abb3-f559920b341> (accessed 12 June 2006).

United States and other countries and cultures can obscure legitimate differences in perspective. For example, the interactions between individuals and their communities are very different in the United States and the Arab and Muslim worlds. As Rami Khoury, editor-at-large for Beirut's English newspaper *The Daily Star*, explained:

In fact, people in most countries of the Middle East, in Asia and Africa give up personal freedom in return for the benefits they get from belonging to a group, the family, the tribe, the religious group, the clan, the ethnic group; you know, the Armenians, the Kurds, the Druze, and the Islamic Ummah, the Arab nation, all of these [...] But this group that you belong to gives you meaning, gives you protection, gives you a sense of hope for the future. It gives you all of those things that you in this country get from your status as individual citizens in a country run according to the rule of law in which there is a mechanism, reasonably fair, for a redress of grievance and adjudication of your disputes through the law. We don't have that system in most of the third world and the Arab world, so you don't get these things from a sense of security or a sense of identity or sense of well-being for the future. You don't get them from your status as a citizen in a state of law or land. You get them from your family, your tribe, your religious group, whatever.²³

By contrast, the classic American hero, in art and in life, from Huckleberry Finn to Rosa Parks, is the individual who fights the system. This difference in roles given to families and individuals has precipitated some of the misunderstandings between cultures.²⁴ If cultural diplomacy helped to illuminate such difference between our cultures, then perhaps it could begin to help us to understand one another as well.

Politics Demonizes, Art Humanizes: The Potential of Cultural Diplomacy Today

Given the Iraq war, the prison scandals, the stagnation of the Middle East peace process, and the election of Hamas, this is a particularly difficult moment for relations between the United States and the Arab and Muslim worlds. During times of tension and conflict such as these, cultural diplomacy can emerge as the most effective – and the only viable – means of

23) Rami Khoury, 'Unprecedented Opportunity,' an interview at the Center for Public Integrity, 2 March 2005, at <http://www.publicintegrity.org/report.aspx?aid=665#> (accessed 16 June 2006).

24) Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin* (Detroit MI: Free Press, 2006), contrasts the importance of the individual in the West with values and practices in Muslim societies. Laila Lalami, 'The Missionary Position', *The Nation*, 19 June 2006, argues that differences are not so stark.

communication. Creative expression crosses cultures, helping people from diverse backgrounds to find common ground. To maximize the impact of cultural diplomacy, the following should be understood:

- Cultural diplomacy is a two-way street.
- Cultural diplomacy operates in the long term.
- Cultural diplomacy does not explain or compensate for unpopular policies.
- Cultural diplomacy can increase understanding between different peoples and cultures.
- Cultural diplomacy can divert or entertain while communicating aspects of US culture, such as diversity, opportunity, individual expression, freedom of speech and meritocracy.
- Cultural diplomacy can open doors between US diplomats and their host countries, even when relations are strained.
- Cultural diplomacy cannot be effectively ‘measured’; it makes a qualitative, not quantitative difference in relations between nations and peoples.
- Cultural diplomacy works best when it caters to the interests of a host country or region.
- In today’s climate of tight budgets, cultural diplomacy needs to be creative, flexible and opportunistic.

Effective cultural diplomacy initiatives can be wholly original conceptions, or they can build on extant programmes, exhibitions or performances; they can be sponsored by the government or by the private sector. Most important, though, is that they resonate with the local population. Sometimes a positive impact is predictable, other times not. For example, the success of a visiting break-dancing group to Damascus in the 1980s exceeded all expectations. The Syrian audience became so carried away that even the security guards joined in, pantomiming living in a glass cage as they danced.²⁵

The potential for cultural diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world far surpasses the record to date. Considering what has worked well and what might work in the future, I will now look at the possibilities for cultural diplomacy in three key areas: film; music; and literature.

25) The description of the break-dancing group in Syria relies on Schneider, *Diplomacy that Works*. The information originally came from a conversation with Marjorie Ransom in February 2003. See also William A. Rugh, *American Encounters with Arabs: The ‘Soft Power’ of US Public Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006), p. 100.

Film

Already well established in Iran, Egypt and India, film is growing in other Arab and Muslim countries including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and even Yemen. For a country like Iran, film provides one of the few openings for Americans. Now entering its twenty-fifth year, the Fajr film festival includes US films (even if none won awards in 2005) and Americans among its judges. Dubai, Cairo and Oman all hold film festivals, and Arab and Muslim film festivals take place throughout Europe and America. It is only a concomitant increase in production and screening of contemporary films from the Arab and Muslim worlds that is lacking.

Against all odds, the first Yemeni feature film, *A New Day in Old Sana'a*, was released in 2005. Director Bader Ben Hirsi and producer Ahmed Abdali wanted to 'counter the sensationalist coverage of the Arab world' and to enable viewers to 'go behind the walls and [find] out a bit more about the women, the men, the culture, customs, and traditions' of Yemen.²⁶ Making the film entailed shipping nine tons of equipment from Beirut; finding and training Yemeni actors; fending off angry onlookers, a hostile press, and the Ministry of Culture; and a public defence before the Parliament.²⁷ *A New Day in Old Sana'a* has been shown to acclaim in many venues from Cairo (where it won the Arab Film Award at the Cairo Film Festival) to Toronto and New York, but it has only been screened a few times in Sana'a itself. Even so, the Yemeni Parliament has said that it would 'fund' another film (out of a US\$ 1.4 million budget, the Yemeni government contributed US\$ 40,000).

The example of *A New Day in Old Sana'a* is illustrative of the difficulties in making films in most of the Arab and Muslim world. Despite the burgeoning popularity of film and film festivals there, more than 90 per cent of the films shown are US films. Furthermore, Arab-made films tend to be parochial, and apart from festivals, are rarely screened outside their country of origin.²⁸ Oil-rich Gulf states such as the UAE and Oman host lavish film festivals and celebrate film icons such as Egyptian director Youssef Chahine or actor Adel Iman, but funding for young filmmakers is virtually non-existent. Traditionally, European (rather than US) sources have provided funding for films from the Arab world, but with a distinct predilection for

26) Bader Ben Hirsi at the 'Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar', US-Islamic World Forum, Doha, Qatar, 19 February 2006.

27) Conversations with Bader Ben Hirsi in February 2006. The cast bonded so completely through these tribulations that no fewer than five marriages were celebrated among actors and members of the crew.

28) 'Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar', US-Islamic World Forum, Doha, Qatar, 19 February 2006.

political films that focus on the conflicts in the region.²⁹ If the potential of film to break down stereotypes is ever to be realized, then more films about everyday Arab and Muslim lives will have to be made. Equally importantly, to broaden views about the Islamic world in the West, Arab and Muslim actors need to be seen with greater regularity in films and TV shows about everyday life.

The lack of funding in the Arab and Muslim worlds combined with the wealth of experience in filmmaking in the United States opens up a tremendous opportunity for cultural diplomacy. At present, the US government supports film in the Arab and Muslim worlds by sending film experts and US films to festivals in the Middle East and Asia. Supporting young Arab filmmakers could contribute to the opening up of Arab and Muslim societies, given the general tendency of filmmakers to look critically at their worlds.

Although Hollywood can inspire admiration, envy or disgust, it is still the gold standard for filmmaking. Hany Abu-Assad, whose film *Paradise Now* captured a Golden Globe and was nominated for an Oscar, is in a class of his own as the only Arab or Muslim filmmaker to have succeeded in Hollywood. His example is instructive. Recognized as a talent with good ideas, he received mentoring and advice at screenwriting workshops in France and at the Sundance Institute.³⁰ For a film to succeed internationally, as *Paradise Now* has done, Abu-Assad and Michael Nozik, producer of *Syriana*, believe that the film has to speak an international language. In other words, it must adopt a more streamlined, dramatic narrative style than is characteristic of many Arab films. According to Abu-Assad and Nozik, the United States (and the West in general) has much to offer in terms of mentoring and developing talent in filmmaking. The Doris Duke Foundation has partnered with the Sundance Institute to support the participation of more Arab and Muslim filmmakers, but other American groups have yet to seize the opportunity.

The United States has everything to gain by becoming more generous with its financial and human resources in filmmaking. Film has the power to tear down as well as build up; the United States was targeted in a recent Turkish film about the fighting in Iraq, which went on to become the most popular film in the country. The wife of the Turkish Prime Minister even attended the opening of this high-profile anti-US production. Given the power of film to spread negative images of the United States, it is in US interests to support filmmakers in creating images that bridge, rather than widen, cultural gaps.³¹

29) Conversations with filmmakers Omar Naim, Hany Abu-Assad, Bader Ben Hirsi and Ahmed Abdali.

30) Conversations with Hany Abu-Assad and Michael, February and March 2006.

31) A participant in the Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar revealed that when she spent several days with Chechen rebels in 1997, she discovered that the rebel leader Basayev modelled himself after an unlikely combination of William Wallace and Rambo.

Music

The worldwide dominance of hip-hop as well as the popularity of Muslim musicians such as Sami Yusef among non-Muslim audiences proves that music is a universal language. Although it originated in the United States, hip-hop music is now pervasive enough in the Arab and Muslim worlds to warrant a Wikipedia entry on 'Arab Hip-Hop'. Like jazz, it has resonated throughout the world with singers and groups from Amsterdam to Almaty integrating the basic beat of American hip-hop with their own traditions and language. A genre conceived as outsiders' protests against the system, hip-hop resonates with those marginalized from the mainstream. From the suburbs of Paris to Kyrgyzstan in central Asia, hip-hop music reflects the struggle against authority.³² When terrorism expert Jessica Stern asked Muslim youths in Amsterdam about Americans that they admired, rapper Tupac Shakur was mentioned.³³ In the words of hip-hop artist Ali Shaheed Muhammad:

People identify with the struggle. It doesn't really matter where you come from; we all have the same story. The music has an aggression to it, and it taps into the emotion or the spirit or the soul. Lots of times, people may not understand what you are saying, but they also feel the pain.³⁴

Although talented hip-hop artists perform all over the globe, the United States still has the most respected figures. As with film, why not be more generous with our hip-hop talent? This does not have to mean US domination of the hip-hop scene. Why not have global hip-hop jamming sessions, with artists from different countries playing together? Instead of funding another report researching how to reach marginalized, hostile groups in the Arab and Muslim worlds, why not reach out to them with something we share – hip-hop music? If just one or two of the American hip-hop stars were to become interested in such an initiative, the impact would be tremendous. Even more significant would be if an American Muslim artist, such as Mos Def or Nas, participated in the jamming session or concert. Hip-hop music offers a potential link to Muslim and Arab youth; we should be more creative in tapping it.

32) David Brooks, 'Gangsta, in French', *New York Times*, 10 November 2005, op ed.

33) Conversation with Jessica Stern, March 2005.

34) Press release for the 2006 'US-Islamic World Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar', US-Islamic World Forum, Doha, Qatar, 20 February 2006, at <http://www.us-islamic-worldforum.org>. A four-time Grammy winner, Ali Shaheed Muhammad is the founder of the group A Tribe Called Quest. See also Brooks, 'Gangsta, in French'.

Literature

When Amy Tan delivered a lecture in February 2006 at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Doha, Qatar, she was introduced by two students – one a Qatari, one a Palestinian – both of whom spoke of how profoundly Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* had influenced their adolescent struggles with issues of identity and culture. Initially astonished by the reaction, Tan said:

I had no idea that people would read this book about a very quirky family of Chinese-Americans and that anyone would identify with it. Imagine my surprise when people came up to me who were Jewish and Turkish and German saying that the book was exactly like relations in their families.³⁵

The two young Arab women found their own questions and doubts mirrored in the struggles of Tan's characters with issues of tradition, identification, patriotism and loss. It did not matter that the characters were Chinese-American; the stories appealed on an emotional level.

That is the key to the power of art, and to the potential power of cultural diplomacy – the appeal to emotions. In explaining her decision to write a novel as a way to respond to the tragedy of Myanmar, Tan observed that without deliberately delivering a message, it is possible 'through the serendipity of art to create something that resonates with people'.³⁶ Millions will learn about the repressive regime in Myanmar as they enjoy *Saving Fish from Drowning*; a negligible fraction of Amy Tan's readership would be likely to read a policy paper on Myanmar.

Literature can offer a textured, moving, thought-provoking and entertaining introduction to the United States, and yet the number of books translated into Arabic every year is negligible. Cairo, Egypt, the second largest US Embassy in the world, received just US\$ 37,500 in 2006 for translation projects; the US Embassy in Amman, Jordan, received less than half that amount.³⁷ While such funding is often supplemented by private efforts, it is in the US government's direct, strategic interest to support both English-Arabic and Arabic-English translations to bridge the gap in understanding between cultures.

Translated literature should also be reassessed in light of the widespread use of the internet in many parts of the Arab and Muslim world. Translating

35) 'Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar', US-Islamic World Forum, 19 February 2006.

36) 'Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar', US-Islamic World Forum, 19 February 2006; and Amy Tan, *Saving Fish from Drowning* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2005).

37) Information from T.J. Dowling, Bureau of International Information Programs, US Department of State, 16 June 2006.

literature on the internet could be both cost-effective and efficient. In Egypt, where internet access is free, many more young people are likely to read books, articles and poems on the internet than in their original form. Of course, this is an imperfect solution since many in rural and impoverished settings cannot log on, but in any case translations on the internet would allow a much larger part of the Arab population to be exposed to Western literature. Objections over intellectual property rights might be raised, but hopefully could be solved through government tax incentives, funding, or the good will of the private sector. Using the internet as the purveyor of literature and ideas might also facilitate contact with publics in the Middle East, which has one of the highest proportions of computer users in the world – one computer per eighteen persons, compared with the worldwide average of one per 78.³⁸ In order to maximize the potential benefit of translating literature into Arabic, the US strategy needs to be nimble, opportunistic and willing to use technology to reach more people.³⁹

Soft Power, Hard Dollars

The examples of outreach strategies for film, music and literature give an idea of what might be possible for the United States to achieve by developing creative and coordinated strategies to communicate through culture. The irony is that the country whose number one export is cultural products and whose popular culture permeates the world is struggling to define itself. Henry Hyde Jr, when he was Chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations in the House of Representatives, noted:

How is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has allowed such a destructive and parodied image of itself to become the intellectual coin of the realm overseas?⁴⁰

One factor is the division between private and public sectors in the United States, something that is an anomaly in the Middle East. The dilemma is that the United States's largely profit-driven popular culture is

38) GAO Report, 'State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Significant Challenges', available online at <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/63.htm> (accessed 15 July 2005).

39) GAO Report, 'State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Significant Challenges', notes the lack of an overall strategy for public diplomacy.

40) Henry Hyde Jr, 'Speaking to our Silent Allies: Public Diplomacy and US Foreign Policy', December 2002, available online at <http://usinfor.state.gov/journals/itps/1201/ijpe/pj7-4hyde.htm> (accessed 16 June 2006).

understood by much of the world to 'represent' the United States. Societies in which the lines between the public and private sectors are blurred have difficulty reconciling their cultural climates with the idea that the images of sex and violence in American films and music are fictitious, emanate purely from the private sector and do not reflect a government communication strategy.

Soft power requires hard dollars. Even to begin to make a dent in the negative opinion worldwide about the United States would require an enormous increase in the paltry sums currently allocated for public diplomacy. Although the public diplomacy budget – used for both cultural programming and exchange programmes – has escalated over the last four years, the funds for 2006, just over US\$ 700 million, amount to a fraction of one per cent of the military affairs budget.

The paltry size of the public diplomacy budget and consistently poor results from public opinion polls tell a tragic story about American efforts at cultural diplomacy. For all the reports on and declarations of the importance of public diplomacy, the US government has only paid lip-service to public and cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

The preliminary results of a landmark Gallup poll of Muslim and Arab populations, projected to reach one billion people, indicate the prevalence of a feeling of humiliation that stems from a perceived lack of understanding and lack of respect from the West.⁴¹ Building the understanding, respect and trust to alleviate this feeling of humiliation will require time, as well as cultural diplomacy. In the words of the Egyptian official interviewed by the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy:

Developing respect for others and their ways of thinking – this is what cultural diplomacy does. We want people to know about real Americans. Let your people know that Egyptians are not just fanatics – Islam is one religion, but there are many ways of applying it. Americans should build bridges, they shouldn't be afraid; they need to open up again.⁴²

41) Meredith Buel, 'New Poll of Islamic World Says Most Muslims Reject Terrorism', 2 May 2006, at <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-05/2006-05-02-voa82.cfm? CFID=22 008434&CFTOKEN=48206128> (accessed 15 June 2006); and a conversation with Prof. John Esposito, Georgetown University, February 2006.

42) Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 'Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Democracy', p. 14.

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