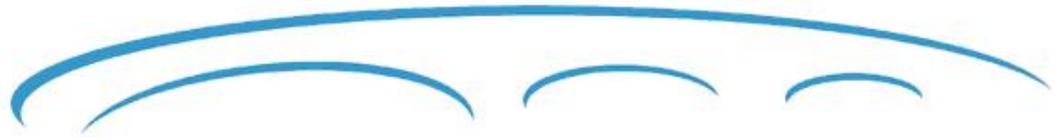


BRIDGING THE GULF



Foundation for Human Security in the Middle East

## **BRIDGING THE GULF FOUNDATION**

### **Gulf Cooperation Council**

### **Civil Society conference**

Brussels, May 4-6 2010  
(summary)



In the frame of building the capacities of civil society leaders and activists from the Gulf region, Bridging the Gulf foundation held it's third outreach and networking visit in Brussels.

During this particular visit to Brussels, the participants' focus was on the strengthening of internal relationship and team building but also to build the capacities of the participants regarding who is who at EU level from official EU structures and institutions to CSOs and NGOs settled in Brussels. Enabling the participant to develop contacts, be more involved and open to the world, understanding how major NGO's , civil society structures, international institutions as the EU do function: mechanisms, goals, policy, achievements, foreign policy, etc.

The first meeting during this visit was an informal open discussion among participants, who stressed their desire to contribute to development of the network and to be seen as a reliable local civil society partner. The meeting also discussed the embryonic stadia of the civil society development in the region and identified key priorities and thematic issues that require more focus and support as support to youth, women rights, civil society empowerment, agency and participation, etc. It is clear that bridging and bonding among the civil society community in the GCC region is a necessity. Bridging the Gulf foundation is a capacity building network from the region for the region. Local ownership is and will remain key understanding for working with local communities, requesting building alliances and working across sectors and actors.

Also meetings took place with Members of the European Parliament, the Delegation for the relations with the Arab Peninsula, European Union Officials at the European Commission. Informative sessions were organised allowing participants to be introduced to the EU policy for the GCC region. Participants realised that the EU is now seeking to move beyond discussions on a free trade agreement. The fundamental purpose is to improve the relations with the entire GCC region by developing a constructive relationship that can benefit both sides. Oil has been the centrepiece of trade relations but the EU is now seeking to move beyond discussions on the free trade agreement, which has been too prominent in the relationship so far. The Commission recognizes the need to adapt, to listen and work in a progressive manner with the GCC region.

A Joint Action Programme was developed, which is one of the EU's instruments of cooperation. This programme concerns cooperation in areas such as transport, climate adaptation but also education and culture. Although the topic of civil society is not a joint priority between the two regions, discussion on civil society development could be held within this programme as it can touch in principle on all social aspects. The upcoming 20th GCC-EU inter-ministerial meeting in June 2010 will endorse this joint programme. The EU also takes an active interest in making effective the UPR process of the UN.

Bridging the Gulf delegation intervened by pointing to the regional tensions and instability of the region but also the value of the Kuwaiti model, i.e., allowing broader participation in open elections and thus helping to combat fundamentalist trends. Also the positive steps undertaken by Bahrain in term of allowing space, however limited, for civil society NGOs and activists to interact and express their expectations was perceived as an encouraging step. The GCC is receptive to international encouragement, especially if and when it comes from the EU. Furthermore Bridging the Gulf participants stressed again the problem of a lack of a common approach, as individual EU member states have different interests with the region. Any fragmented and exclusive approach to the region motivated by particular limited and short term results, will definitely undermine trust building, genuine and positive long term changes for the best of all.

Bridging the Gulf followed up by initiating a discussion about its project and strategy for the region, during which it was highlighted that the organisation's role is to provide capacity-building in the region so as to create a network of civil society organisations and individuals.

Improving channels of communication mainly in the field of exchange of experience is one of the ways by which this may be achieved. Providing training mainly with the youth and women is yet another means, and has been used as effective tool. Stimulating more inclusive societies, room for more social cohesion is much needed to make change happen. Bridging the Gulf aims to empower people. It operates in fragile, tensed and sometimes difficult contexts. It seeks to establish relations with all parties across sectors and actors. It lobbies local governments to promote free civil society activities. Its main task is to help local communities and countries in the region to overcome fears and sensitivity towards building an active civil society supporting local initiatives to empower individuals and local activists and civil society members to generate adhesion and support for human rights culture.

There is a need to enter into dialogue with all, including the newly installed national human right bodies, involving them in an open dialogue, stimulating them to work in the fields they are supposed to tackle. Also the issue of the need to promote coherent societies was raised, suggesting that a more inclusive approach to national identity should be promoted. It is important to create community spaces for everybody so as to promote social cohesion and reduce fundamentalist tendencies.

The challenge in developing the relationship between the EU and the GCC region lies in identifying commonalities in values, overcoming the duality between a universal and a culturally relativist approach. The difficulty also lies in being able to balance the differences in values and interests. Too often, the differences come up rather than the commonalities, especially when it comes to dealing with 'touchy issues'. All aspects must be interconnected to achieve a comprehensive approach to the relationship.



All in all, the meetings proved an excellent opportunity to networking and exchanging information and concerns – a promise for further cooperation. The results of such gathering are clear and measurable. The participants, a combination of youth and pioneers of the Foundation, men and women, individuals with different religious and ethnic backgrounds working hand in hand to foster and spread the culture of human rights, respect tolerance and positive social change at their regional level, supporting each other regardless their background (even the translation to non English speaking participants was secured by the participants themselves, creating an unprecedented solidarity and bonding among the group, coming from different countries in the GC region. The network members are aware of the need to be inclusive towards each other regardless the different backgrounds, developing a good team spirit, spend time and energy to support others creating this peer to peer movement. In a conservative context such as the GCC region, too many restrictions even coming from local societies themselves seriously limit civil society activities and development. Positive change is a long process demanding lots of dedication and awareness raising activities. Promoting positive change in mentalities, behaviours and ultimately changes in laws requires much attention and a large support. The loom of a better future ground gives no alternative except going ahead with reforms engaging in constructive dialogue, building trust, social cohesion educating local communities for the best of all.