



**SHARAKA**  
ENHANCING UNDERSTANDING  
AND COOPERATION IN EU-GCC RELATIONS



**شراكة**  
تعزيز التفاهم والتعاون في علاقات الاتحاد  
الاوروبي ودول مجلس التعاون الخليجي

## **Sharaka Workshop**

# ***Dialogue on Opportunities for Enhancing Understanding and Cooperation in Media and Communication and Higher Education in EU-GCC Relations***

**Muscat, 26 March 2013**

## **Workshop Report**

The workshop held at the City Seasons Hotel in Muscat, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March and entitled “Dialogue on Opportunities for Enhancing Understanding and Cooperation in EU-GCC relations in the fields of Media and Communications, Higher Education and Scientific Research” was centred on the work of two Omani researchers who presented the papers drafted in the context of the Sharaka’s research activities.

Mr. Ahmad Al Mukhaini is an independent researcher in political development and human rights. He is also a consultant in strategic studies at Tawasul and has worked for many years in the field of higher education. He presented a paper on *EU-GCC Cooperation in the fields of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Proposals for the Way Forward with focus on Higher Education.*

Ms. Fatma Al Araimi is Assistant Editor of Alam al-Iktisad Wal A‘mal magazine and Editor in Chief of Signature magazine. Her paper focused on, *The image of the GCC in the EU media and vice versa. Research paper on perspectives of Media practitioners from the GCC & the EU about the other region and the way forward.*

In the first paper, Mr. Al Mukhaini proposed an incremental approach to foster Higher Education and Scientific Research (HESR) exchange programmes between GCC and EU institutions. In this respect, Mr. Al Mukhaini expressed his belief that adopting a result-oriented approach would yield better results than the current effort-oriented method. In order to validate and verify the progress and milestones reached in the context of this cooperation, a rigorous method of monitoring and evaluation would also needs to be implemented.

The second paper, by Fatma Al Araimi, highlighted the way GCC countries are portrayed in EU media outlets and vice versa. The research analysed the impressions of active press members in these two regions and assessed the ways each believes their region is showcased in the other region’s media. The paper highlighted the main areas of cross-regional interest for journalists and suggests ways to reach a better understanding about these regions among journalists from the EU and the Gulf. According to the

author, bridging this gap will lead to more accurate and comprehensive reporting from both regions and hence more understanding and cooperation between the EU and the GCC.

### Feedback session

The second part of the day was dedicated to a group activity session during which time conference participants could give their feedback about the two policy papers presented earlier and actively contribute to the discussion. Dr. Jan Keulen, director of the Doha Centre for Media Freedom, chaired the feedback session. With reference to the paper on mass media, some remarks were made about factors, like nationalism, religion, education and others, that could influence perceptions about other cultures.

One suggestion that emerged from the workshop related to the methodology used when conducting similar surveys as the one presented in the paper by Ms. Al Araiimi. Interview samples should not be chosen randomly but on the basis of their actual job. Many journalists who work in the Gulf are actually educated in the fields of international affairs, so their perception of the relationships between countries is significantly different from those who simply describe themselves as “journalists”. Another comment in this regard related to the fact that while there is a continuous stream of journalists coming from Europe and heading to the Gulf region in order to understand and obtain more information about this area doubts were raised as to whether the same can be said of Gulf journalists and their interest in Europe.

On the theme of understanding the other and of deepening institutional relationships, reference was made to an international task force of academics, journalists and media leaders that discuss issues such as journalistic ethics and media administration and whose activities are meant to influence the decisions of international policy makers.

Another central issue when dealing with the question of journalism in the Gulf relates to the availability and quality of journalism training. It was also mentioned that before discussing content, one should first tackle the question of journalistic ethics and cultural sensitivity, given that the process of engaging with the other is a delicate matter. Notwithstanding the fact that GCC countries are working in the direction of greater transparency and media freedom, in order to understand other cultures it is always necessary to listen carefully to each other and, especially for journalists, to engage in dialogues with their EU/GCC counterparts centred on mutual respect and understanding.

One might consider other issues once these have been sufficiently addressed like, for example, access to information in the Arab World and the effectiveness of exchange programmes. As a matter of fact, such programmes already exist but they should be further improved in order to get better results, and the first thing that should be done is to increase the funding for such programmes.

### Focus Group activity

In the final stage of the Workshop the participants were divided in two focus groups: one for each policy paper presentation. One group discussed media while the other focused on higher education.

### *Higher Education and Scientific Research*

The focus group on education proposed the development of a series of indicators that could be used to measure progress in the Joint Action Programme. Later, the moderator proposed to shift the original topic of the focus group and suggested the participants try to imagine the main aspirations and needs that could be answered in an International Cooperation Project between EU and GCC. He proposed to simulate the situation in which half of the table would play the role of EU, while the other would play that of GCC countries. Each would then outline their respective aspirations and needs. These were the main objectives that emerged from the discussion:

- Increasing the number of students who travel between the two areas.
- Have some knowledge of those who remain abroad after completing their studies and of those who return to their respective countries.
- Have some knowledge of how these students structure their education.
- Make joint publications between universities.
- Increasing the number of contacts between single actors in the field of HESR and between institutions.
- Increasing the number of Research Fellowships and the amount of research funds.
- Increasing the budget allocated to HESR.

It should be highlighted here that the lack of political will in developing HESR policies was one of the recurring issues in both the presented papers and in the discussion held during the focus group. Also, a greater involvement of institutions seems to be one of the most important objectives, together with the need to increase funding allocated for these purposes.

### *Media and Culture*

The discussion in the Media and Culture focus group was extremely lively, with participants expressing different views and opinions, thus signalling that the topic attracts a great deal of attention and that final answers are far from being formulated. Despite some disagreement on substantive issues, all participants agreed on the fact that the objectives and the mechanisms of cooperation in Media and Communications that were put forth in the paper need to be better specified with a view to avoiding general statements and repetitions. Another methodological point was raised, namely the need to distinguish between short-term and long-term goals. In the short term, cooperation between the EU and the GCC on the topics of media and communications should focus on technical assistance and reform of the GCC media landscape through dialogue, instead of tackling more sensitive issues such as media freedom and independence. A preparatory step could be the creation of a Media Task Force composed of members from the journalists' associations in GCC countries and tasked with initiating a discussion about the problems besetting the media landscape in the region.

The debate then moved on to discuss issues related to the changes and opportunities brought about by the expansion of social media. Some of the issues discussed included questions of freedom and accuracy, as well as the existence of international standards. These issues should guide EU-GCC reflection in the long term while also bearing in mind that some indicators for media development have already been developed by UNESCO and could thus be applied to the GCC media landscape, including new social media.

Regarding the possibility of holding exchange programmes for journalists, some participants in the focus group objected that these initiatives are not always successful due to the existence of a certain inertia at the level of media companies in the Gulf region. On the contrary, other participants claimed that they are useful experiences that can trigger change at the individual level with a positive fallout on all the media environment in general.

Further points addressed in the discussion included:

- There is a worrying lack of home-grown foreign policy reporting in the Gulf, which matches a certain reduction of the volume and the quality in Europe as well. It is therefore necessary to enhance the ability of local journalists to produce home-grown news – particularly on foreign policy topics – instead of relying on the products of news agencies.
- In order to increase EU-GCC exchange platforms on the media, but not only, a Master's programme on European studies should be created in Gulf universities.
- Cultural exchanges have flourished in the last few years with a surge in the number of visits on both sides. However, it was argued, this does not necessarily mean that mutual understanding has increased. This point needs to be borne in mind and addressed when devising cultural exchange programmes between the two sides.