

WORKSHOP REPORT

“THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS”

A Summer Training Course - organised by the Mediterranean Academy for Diplomatic Studies

LISA LOMBARDI

This summer training course was convened between the 17th and the 28th of July 2000. As the title suggests this was not a conference consisting in a series of lectures but rather a training course where input from the participants (16 in all) played a vital role in the overall success of this event.

I was particularly pleased by the professional layout of the course structure. The topics chosen were both interesting and unusual and some of them even controversial. The fact that some of the participants were also lecturing was also an unusual feature and the situation lent itself to various heated debates between lecturers and participants which resulted in a very healthy atmosphere of discussion where everyone's input was welcome. The participants varied from diplomats to analysts to journalists and advocates to mention but a few. Thus the ensemble was a melting pot not only of various cultures and political and religious beliefs but also of perspective as each person contributed according to their personal work experiences in the field of human rights. The list of speakers was just as diverse with a panel which ranged from *H.R.H. Princess Wijdan Ali* in her capacity as the Vice President of the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy to *Karim Ghezraoui*, Human Rights Officer for the UN (OHCHR) amongst nine other professors, advocates and other academics.

This report is an account based on my own perceptions as a participant to the training course. First of all, I must say that it

was the very title of the conference that attracted my attention. I think that the training course succeeded in delivering an intensive course on the notion of human rights and their relationship with various cultures. A basic knowledge of human rights was all that was required, since the course was very intensive and the lecturers gave a general overview of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights as well as specific lectures on the European Convention on Human Rights (Dr. T. Azzopardi) and other specific lectures which dealt with the African and Arab Charter (Professor Khadija Elmadmad).

I was very interested in the ongoing controversy which kept cropping up in various discussions throughout the entire conference, regarding the universality of otherwise of human rights. In this regard, opinions differed greatly. There were those who firmly adhered to the idea that human rights and the values they purport to promote are not only intrinsically part of the human make-up but more importantly that they are universal. Whilst there were those who claimed that there is no such thing as an absolute set of values and that the human rights present in the UN Charter are not as absolute as they are proclaimed to be; particularly because there are those who regard them as a manifestation of the ideology and values of the Western world which are being imposed on the rest of the world.

Wa'el Kheir, a lecturer at various universities in Lebanon, gave a total of four lectures which were divided into two main parts the first on International Law and Human Rights and the second on Regionalism. Mr. Kheir is an avid believer in the universality of human rights and he stressed that the UN Declaration differed from all other international law documents since it speaks about the dignity of man. Mr. Kheir went on to explain that "...as a document, its greatest achievement was that of giving a legal value to concepts which prior to its existence belonged solely to the realm of philosophy." The declaration concretised these values in terms of law and it created rights based on these values, constantly bearing in mind the intrinsic nature of such rights. It is for these reasons that according to Mr. Kheir human rights are universal, because they are so basic and intrinsic in man since they preserve every human beings' dignity.

It was fascinating to then hear the other side of the story, when H.R.H. Princess Wijdan Ali gave her key-note lecture. H.R.H spoke

about the division between the North and the South in the Mediterranean basin and she highlighted the differences in the application of human rights by comparing for instance the violations in France to those in Turkey and showing how the nature of the violations varies from country to country and from one culture to the next. The Princess spoke about the relationship between religion and human rights and in particular she gave an overview of the relationship between Islam and human rights. The Princess criticised the universality of the Charter and she expressed her view that human rights as we know them are not as universal as we make them out to be, especially because one must keep in mind that most of the signatories to the Charter now were not even represented when the Charter was being drawn up. On the other hand she mentioned how significant the Charter was in emphasizing the dignity of human beings at large and that it is important to keep in mind that human rights are in this sense universal, since the only qualification required for one to be entitled to them is being human. The Princess commented that something needs to be done to address the issue of the uniform application of human rights, not solely on an internal level but in particular when states relate to one another. Yet she stressed that the question is not whether there exists a relationship between Islam and human rights or between human rights and Christianity or Judaism but rather the emphasis should be shifted to recruiting symbols of human rights by making full use of a state's cultural repertoire. Thus rather than alienating the culture of the state and introducing human rights as a distinct and separate concept, one could integrate human rights within an already existing system.

Other interesting areas which were dealt with included a discussion on the Rights of Refugees and Current Issues (Professor Vera Gowlland-Debbas), A Committee Simulation Exercise (Lucienne Attard), Media, Civil Society and Human Rights (Emad Omar), Racism, Xenophobia in Europe (Mounir Belayachi), Humanitarian Intervention- A role for the OSCE (Captain David Attard), Humanitarian Law and Intervention (Pierre-Yves Fux) and Development Aid (Felix Meier).