

ASIA-MIDDLE EAST-NORTH AFRICA

In the Middle East, in the region once known as Mesopotamia, there arose about five thousand years ago the first cities of which there is formal register. This, together with the evidence of commercial exchanges offers us with the certainty of very ancient links that joined this region to the rest of the Asian continent. Throughout history the Middle East has had a decisive role in the long distance commercial routes that have linked together the most extreme Eastern region of the Asian continent to Europe and Africa.

The Middle East is a part of Asia that shares a common legacy of civilisation with the peoples of the whole continent. During the historical golden age of the Islamic Civilisation, Baghdad, Damascus, Shiraz, were key centres of dissemination of knowledge and culture throughout Asia and well beyond.

Referring to more recent events, in the 20th century, the struggle against colonialism united peoples from various parts of Asia and the Middle East. One very special moment that showed the convergence of these leaders and movements was the 1955 Bandung Conference, held in Indonesia. That was a landmark meeting that initiated a series of political victories that led to the independence of more than 30 countries in few years and encouraged the former colonised peoples to make their voices heard by the rest of the world.

In the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, the Middle East and the North of Africa — that in many fields have close connections — were the stage of very dramatic, bloody conflicts and foreign interventions that have created one of the most challenging humanitarian catastrophes of history with millions of refugees and hundreds of thousands of lives lost. This has led the Middle East and North Africa — the MENA region, as it is called — to a huge challenge: to rebuild the infrastructure and the political institutions, to assure the refugees the right to return to a safe nation, to face and solve the social disintegration issue, to believe once more in a hopeful future and to eradicate the causes of terror. To accomplish all these objectives the countries and societies involved will need global support and solidarity, in particular of the Asian countries and peoples themselves.

There are some ongoing Asian initiatives, such as the Chinese “One-Belt, One Road project” (referred to in the media as the New Silk Road project), which contemplates huge infrastructure programs and billionaire investments, involving ports, railways, highways, communications etc., beneficially involving Middle East countries. But this alone will not be enough without addressing the major political challenges. In this field, the Bandung spirit could be an important guideline to the discussions that will certainly be taking place in the coming future.

This session welcomes contributions that could help to analyse and overview the past and present relations between Asia and the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), in a very broad dimension: political, historical, economical, social, diplomatic, judicial and cultural, provoking and encouraging participation in the debate.

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