

Religion and Social Cohesion at the Heart of the Intercultural Debate

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Social cohesion is today at the core business of intercultural relations. Through the prism of religious beliefs and cultural diversity, Sara Silvestri analyses the quality of interactions among the citizens of the Euro-Mediterranean region, as well as potential areas of convergence around key values and sensitive topics. She reflects on the evolution of trends between the two Anna Lindh/Gallup surveys, positively observing a coming together around the importance of family solidarity, and openness to pluralism within societies.

It is commonly assumed that religious and cultural identities matter in the Euro-Mediterranean region and that growing cultural and religious diversity poses a challenge to national identities, social cohesion, and political and economic stability. The wealth of fresh information provided by the Anna Lindh/Gallup Opinion Polls opens precious insights into themes that are at the heart of intercultural relations.

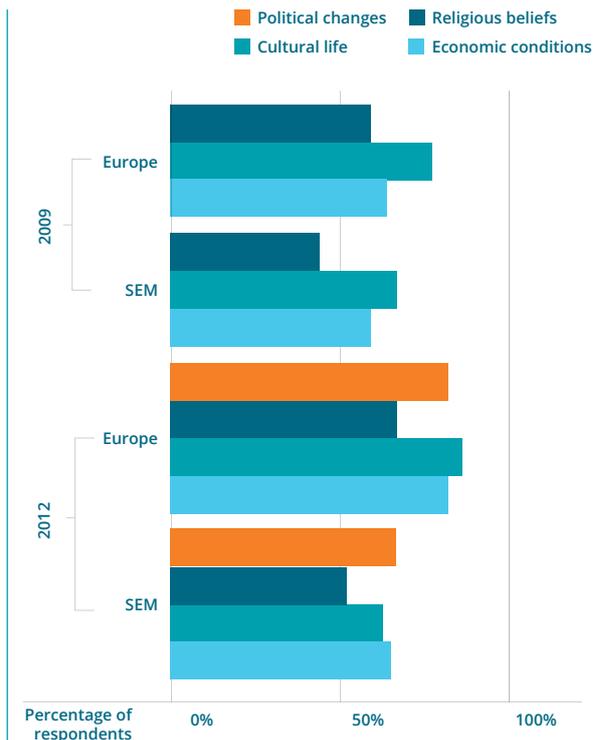
Faith: Coexistence of convergences and divergences

It is commonly thought that religion has a central place in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries' societies, and that it is increasingly irrelevant North of the Mediterranean. Instead, the ALF/Gallup Polls reveal unexpected results. Partial convergence, as well as divergence, is visible across the region when considering attitudes to either religious beliefs and practices, or to the value of religious and cultural diversity, as well as when comparing and contrasting the two.

Both in the 2009 and 2012 polls, the least amount of respondents in each set of countries declared to be interested in the religious beliefs and practices of the other group, compared to the number of those attentive to cultural life or economic conditions (Chart 3.1). Yet, in the course of those three years, this theme increased dramatically in importance in the whole Euro-Mediterranean region. The religious beliefs and practices of the other side of the Mediterranean mattered to only 45% of the SEM respondents in 2009. By 2012, this figure rose by six points (to 51%). In Europe, 68% of people held it significant, versus the previous 57% (that-is-to-say an increase by 11 points). What are the causes and implications of these upward shifts? And how do they relate with the relevance of religious beliefs and the phenomenon of cultural and religious diversity, in each group of countries and on a domestic level?

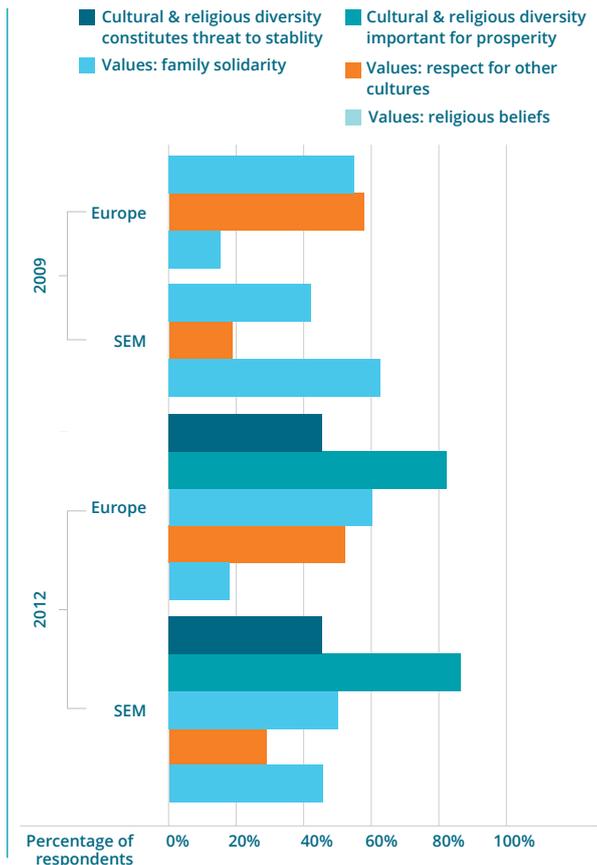
On the one hand, religious beliefs and practices are at the bottom of the list of potential mutual interests in the whole region. This could indicate a certain level of widespread secularist-inspired indifference to the topic of religion. Such a reading would be justified by the common assumption that European societies are highly secularised. The ensuing expectation would be that the recent democratic transitions in SEM countries have opened the way to secularisation and the dissemination of atheistic beliefs there too. On the other hand we noted a general increase in interest in others' religious

Chart 3.1
Interest in news and information about SEM and European countries in 2009 and 2012



Survey question: "Thinking about the countries bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea/European countries, how much interest would you say you personally have in news and information about their Economic conditions; Cultural life and lifestyle; Religious beliefs and practices; Political changes?" **Base:** All respondents, % of sum of 'Very interested' and 'Somewhat interested' by regions. Chart compiled by S. Silvestri using data from Anna Lindh/Gallup Polls 2009 and 2012 (© Silvestri, Anna Lindh/Gallup 2012).

Chart 3.2
Attitudes to religious values and cultural diversity in SEM and Europe in 2009 and 2012



Survey Question: Q.2 'Could you please tell me, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Cultural and religious diversity constitutes a threat to the stability of society/ is important for the prosperity of your society?' And Q.3 'In bringing up their children, parents in different societies may place different emphasis on different values. Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only I'd like to know which one of these six would you say is most important when raising children: Curiosity; Obedience; Religious beliefs; Independence; Family solidarity; Respect for the other cultures? **Base:** Q.2: All respondents, % by regions, where 'Agree': sum of 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree somewhat' answers, and 'Disagree': sum of 'Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree somewhat' answers"; Q.3: All respondents, % of sum of 'Most important' and 'Second most important' by regions". Chart compiled by S.Silvestri using data from ALF/Gallup opinion Polls 2009 and 2012 (© Silvestri, Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

beliefs between the 2009 and 2012. This result could therefore be interpreted as a sign of close – perhaps even intensifying – attachment to individual (as well as group) faith identities. This dynamic would demonstrate the on-going process of 'de-secularisation' of the world (reference to Berger, 1999) and potentially could entail in addition the risk of reduced attention to other cultures and religions. A cross analysis of the various sections of the Anna Lindh/Gallup Survey pertaining to religious beliefs and cultural diversity will help to unravel these puzzling results and will point to the simultaneous coexistence of multiple trends.

Respondents were given a list of values related to raising children and were asked to select the first and second

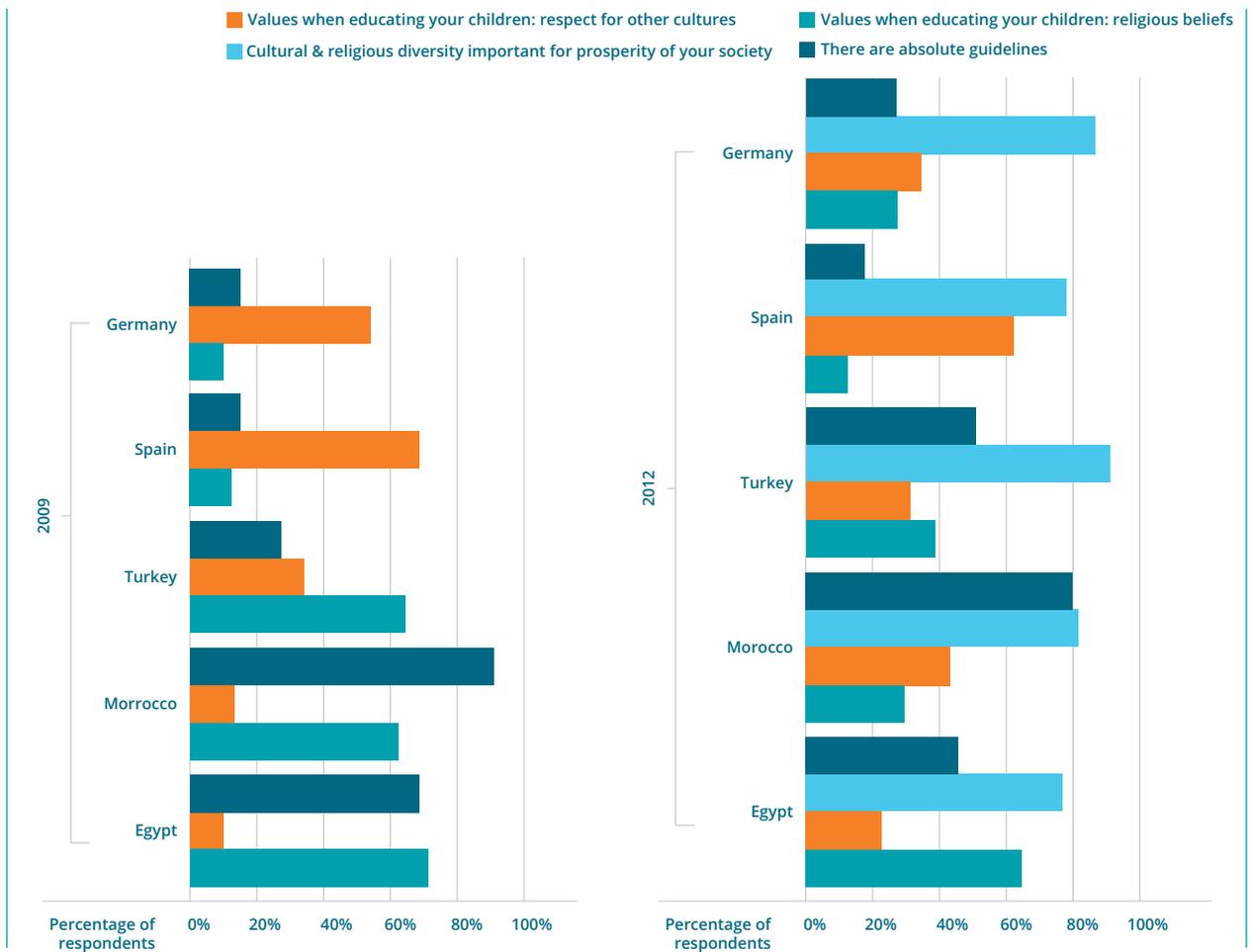
most important ones. Regarding the appreciation of religious values in one's own context, Europe emerged predictably lower compared to the SEM in each round of polls (2012: 18% versus 49% SEM; 2009: 14% versus 62% SEM, Chart 3.2). Indeed, the least interested participants were from the most secularised countries of Northern Europe, such as Sweden or Denmark, which scored 5% (2009) and 6% (2012) respectively. Yet, the comparison of the 2009 with the 2012 data shows a curious inverse trend affecting the two sides of the Mediterranean (Chart 3.2). The number of respondents favourable to teaching religious beliefs to their children increased in Europe – both as a total average (from 14% to 18%) as well as in some individual countries, but decreased in SEM countries (from 62% to 49%).

In Europe, Germany experienced the most dramatic shift, with a rise of 15 percentage points (26% compared to 11% in 2009). As a result, this country rocketed from bottom to top of the European list, even above the predictably religious Catholic Ireland and Poland (which scored 17% and 19%). This contrasts with 2009, when Germany was among the least interested in this topic (11%), just before Sweden. Belgium scored 9% in 2012, which is not far from the 12% of France in 2009, a country with whom it shares various commonalities (such as language and level of secularisation). In Albania, 11% of respondents found religious values important. The atheist legacy of the country's Communist past has certainly contributed to a high level of secularisation, which puts Albania in line with the findings for France, Belgium and Spain. Spain showed a slight decrease in interest in faith values (from 13% to 11%) in 2012, which may be due to growing leftist and anti-clerical views in the country. In general, the Spanish findings diverge slightly from those for Italy (15%) and Poland (19%). These three countries are supposed to share an equally strong Catholic heritage, and yet they appear to align with countries with which they do not share religious similarities. For instance, exactly the same percentage of respondents (19%) in Hungary (2009) and in Poland (2012) stated that religious values are important for the education of their children. The views on this topic in Bosnia-Herzegovina (2009) and in Greece (2009) were very similar (20%), while Italian participants in 2012 replied like those in Great Britain three years before.

We can deduce from the above that the characteristics of specific religious traditions (e.g. Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam) cannot be considered the only and central factors determining the actual relevance of religious values in individual societies and how people relate to the reality of religious and cultural diversity. Instead we should pay attention to the political cultures, historical trajectories, and socio-economic challenges of the countries that we analyse. All these factors together are likely to impact

Chart 3.3

Comparing variables on religious values and respect for cultural diversity by country



Survey questions: Q.4 'Some people believe that there are absolute guidelines to what is good and bad, and what is truth. Others say, that there are no absolute guidelines, things are relative and it depends on the circumstances what we consider to be good or bad. Which view is closer to yours? Q.2[...] People from different cultural, political or religious backgrounds should have the same rights or opportunity to participate in public life [...] Q.3 [...] Religious beliefs [...]; Respect for the other cultures? **Base:** Q.4 All respondents, % by country; Q.2 as in Chart 3.2; Q.3 as in Chart 3.2 Compiled by S. Silvestri, using data from ALF/Gallup Polls 2009 and 2012 (© Silvestri, Anna Lindh//Gallup Poll 2012).

attitudes to religion and diversity.

The Poll results about the relevance of religion for Europe's inhabitants are fascinating. They demonstrate that, on a personal intimate level, there remains considerable interest in faith issues, even though the role of organised or institutional religion has declined. In particular we note that attachment to religious values in 2012 has either remained stable compared to 2009 or has increased. The direction of the trend cannot be clearly identified because the 2012 poll included only two countries from the previous round and the results from these countries go in opposite directions. Spain lost two points, but Germany experienced a huge increase of those focused on religious values. As a result the average for the whole region has been affected by this shift.

This eagerness to transmit one's religious values to future generation could be concerning to some, especially

if seen in tandem with the German results about the theme 'respect for other cultures': the respondents in favour of this fell from 54% in 2009 to 35% in 2012. A less accentuated drop is also visible in Spain (from 67% to 61%). This alarming trend points to the spectres of racism and nationalism. But then it is alleviated when we look at how people answered, in the same countries, to the question of whether cultural diversity is beneficial for societal society: Germany in 2012 ranked like Italy, towards the top (84%) and Spain was midrange (79%). Simultaneously, we note contradictory and ambiguous attitudes to the topic of cultural and religious diversity. The number of those willing to teach respect for other cultures to their children decreased from 58% to 51% in Europe from 2009 to 2012. Yet, in the same period we noted a rise in the interest in the cultural life and religious beliefs of the other shore of the Mediterranean.

Regardless of whether respondents felt a strong or weak attachment to their own and their country's faith

traditions, they may have been triggered to become interested in these issues due to the realisation that their own societies – and the world – are changing, are becoming culturally and religiously more diverse. Hence, whether out of curiosity or by fear, they wish to know more about other societies religious beliefs and practices and, simultaneously, they increasingly treasure their own religious values. In the SEM, on the contrary, support for handing down religious values declined drastically: from 62% in 2009 to 49% in 2012. The most marked shifts concern Turkey where respondents thinking that religious values are important in raising their children dropped from 65% to 39%, and Morocco which went from 62% to 30%. Egyptian views also fell significantly, from 72% to 63%, equal with Tunisia. Simultaneously, views about respect for other cultures improved, attracting 28% of 2012 respondents versus the previous 18% (Chart 3.3)

All these changes sound exceptional but some are more surprising than others. Egypt is one of the SEM countries most renowned for its traditionalist attitudes and strong attachment to religion. In fact Egypt was top of the poll in 2009, with 72% of its respondents declaring that religious values were the most important thing in the education of new generations. But now it appears that Egyptian views have become identical to those of one of its most secularised and Westernised neighbours, Tunisia. The general decline in the number of those supporting religious values in the SEM is not immediately clear and would require additional research in order to be better understood. In Turkey, the shift may be related to recent intense public debates on the role of Islam in Turkish politics and society. The drop in attachment to religious values in Morocco and Egypt is somewhat more surprising but is consistent with the drop in the number of their respondents believing in the existence of ‘absolute guidelines’ (which is an implicit way to measure belief in supra-natural authority): 80% in Morocco in 2012 compared to the previous 88%, while Egypt went from 71% to 44%.

These findings are somewhat unanticipated, considering that both countries have seen an increase in political mobilisation on the part of Islamist movements recently. The latter, in theory, could have impacted (i.e. increased) on societal attachment to religious traditions, reinforcing in-group identities, and in the long term causing intolerance of diversity. There are undoubtedly societal tensions and competing values in Egypt and Morocco at this delicate time of transition; this may explain why the two countries were last in the SEM scale of those believing in the benefit of religious and cultural diversity for societal prosperity (Egypt 78%, Morocco 82%) in 2012. Still, these percentages were higher than for instance those for some European countries (Chart 3.2).

The coexistence of high attachment to religious values with respect for other cultures in countries with active Islamist parties may be surprising to the lay reader but it confirms the research conducted by Moataz Fattah (Fattah, 2006) at the beginning of the 2000s in a large number of Muslim countries. He showed that support for political Islam did not automatically generate anti-women or anti-minority attitudes and that there were ‘no statistically significant difference between Islamist and non-Islamist attitudes towards democratic institutions in any of the cases’ he studied. These percentages are nevertheless quite high if taken individually, in line with the European average and actually even above Denmark (76%) and Belgium (72%). Additionally, when looking at the value ‘respect for other cultures’, both Moroccan and Egyptian attitudes raised considerably between 2009 and 2012: Egypt rose from 9% to 22%, Morocco from 13% to 42%, while Turkey lost 3 points (from 31% to 28%). Hence we can say that diversity is a complicated and divisive issue in all these countries but the situation is improving.

In 2009, 51% and 59% respectively of participants in Syria and Lebanon were favourable to passing on religious beliefs. These averages are lower compared to their SEM neighbours in the same year. Such lukewarm interest in religious values could be associated with the particular government approaches and constitutional arrangements of these two countries, which have promoted secular attitudes and lifestyles in order to manage their multi-ethnic and multi-confessional societies and prevent conflict. In fact these two countries were, together with Turkey (a country with a markedly secular constitution), the most open to religious and cultural diversity among the SEM in 2009: 15% Syria, 20% Lebanon, 31% Turkey.

One wonders what the results of the poll for Syria and Lebanon would be now, in the midst of a prolonged civil war in Syria and with all its ramifications, domestically and internationally, from armed violence, to humanitarian assistance, to migration, to regional balance of power. The closest data we have is for a neighbour, Jordan: 81% of its respondents in 2012 stated that religious beliefs are important for the upbringing of their children and 23% selected respect for other cultures. This data puts Jordan at the top of the SEM for religious values (just after Egypt) and towards the bottom (just before Egypt) for the value of cultural and religious diversity that year.

Cultural and religious diversity: ambiguities and contradictory attitudes

Further insight into Euro-Mediterranean perceptions of faith and cultural and religious pluralism can be drawn from those sections of the poll that explicitly address the significance of religious diversity per se. The 2012 Poll

introduced a new set of questions in an attempt to seize nuances within views about the value of cultural and religious pluralism. The results are especially interesting as they reveal considerable – perhaps higher than expected – similarities between the two shores of the Mediterranean, as well as the existence of contradictory trends within societies.

The percentage of those who regard cultural and religious diversity as important for the prosperity of their own society is almost identical in the SEM (83%) and in Europe (82%), whereas those who disagree are mostly located in Europe (15%, while 10% are in the SEM). The two sets of data combined show that overall SEM populations are more favourable than Northern ones towards religious and cultural diversity. This finding counters many assumptions and will surprise observers. It may be an indication of the democratisation dynamics taking place in the South, especially the new emphasis on freedom of opinion and of religion. However, when asked whether diversity is specifically important as a value in the education of one's children, it emerged, in 2012, as a priority for European countries (51%) but not for the SEM, where this theme attracted only 28% of the respondents.

It is striking that individuals that are strongly in favour of diversity in rather abstract terms are not necessarily ready to implement this in their own lives. This shows that attitudes are not always good indicators of actual behaviours. Still, we should acknowledge that the figure 28% is a considerable improvement from the earlier 18%. When attitudes to diversity are translated into views of actual participation in public life on the part of groups with a different religious or cultural background, support for diversity remains indeed high on both shores; but then Europe appears slightly more open (90%, versus 84% in SEM), and the percentage of those in disagreement becomes equal (9% on both sides). An explanation could be this: acceptance of political pluralism is a key characteristic of consolidated democracies and cannot be expected to happen from day to night after a prolonged period of authoritarianism. Additionally, acceptance of diversity in the European context may have been facilitated by high levels of secularisation, while this process has not taken place in the same way in the SEM, although it is not absent there (for an elaboration of the varieties of secularism: Asad, 2003).

Taken together, all these answers about the value of cultural and religious diversity within individual societies could suggest future positive relations across and within the multifarious group of peoples living in the Euro-Mediterranean space. However, the picture becomes darker, when examining the next section of the opinion poll. Nearly half of the participants across all the

countries polled in the Euro-Med believe that religious and cultural diversity constitutes a threat to the stability of society (48% in Europe, 46% in the SEM). It is striking to note that fear of diversity coexists side by side with the positive attitudes just mentioned above, as well as in parallel with the earlier responses concerning interest in the culture and religion of the other shore of the Mediterranean. How is this contradiction possible and what are its implications?

To make sense of this it may be useful a) to consider how the same countries fared in relation to attitudes to religious values (see above), and also b) to contextualise these results by bringing into the picture other dimensions such as recent (and on-going) migratory movements, the emergence of faith-based politics, and the return of ethno-nationalist feelings all across the region. The so-called 'Arab awakenings' have brought to the fore religiously inspired political parties, such as the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and An-Nahda in Tunisia, as well as a number of other political actors with strong faith identities, both in these countries and in Syria and Libya. While bringing new opportunities for freedom of opinion and of religion, the political transitions have also uncovered ethnic and religious divisions and competition between groups within societies. So, this could explain the ambivalent positions towards diversity among the inhabitants of the Euro-Mediterranean area.

Immigration from the MENA into the EU grew steadily in the course of the 1990s and 2000s. This issue has often been exploited by populist right-wing movements in their political campaigns (Mudde, 2007). Influxes generated by the Arab uprisings since 2011 have added to the normal trend into Europe but have especially significantly affected the neighbouring states in the SEM. The difficulties in absorbing and caring for people that are fleeing situations of fear and instability – as well as simply looking for better opportunities to start a new life – are especially vivid in the context of a global economic crisis and in a weakened Eurozone. In the absence of growth and handicapped by spiralling rates of unemployment, the countries that constitute the migrants' first ports of call in the Mediterranean Sea (e.g. Greece, Spain, Italy) have found it especially hard to face population influxes, despite having also experienced high emigration rates lately (OECD, 2013).

Convergence around family solidarity

From a normative perspective, European countries are highly supportive of the value of diversity: together with family solidarity this variable attracted in 2012 the largest percentage of responses (51% respect for other cultures, 60% family solidarity). Respondents in Italy, Denmark, Spain and Belgium valued most respect for other cultures when raising their children (scoring respectively

65%, 63%, 61% and 61%), while Poland and Ireland were midrange (51% and 59%). Albania, and Germany were the least interested (with respectively 30%, 35%). Positions reversed, though, when considering if religious and cultural diversity is important for the prosperity of society. The latter three countries scored top of the list of those in favour (87% Albania, 85% Ireland, 84% Germany, equal with Italy); Belgium and Denmark ended up bottom (72% and 76%) while Poland and Spain were close to each other in an in-between position (80% and 79%).

A rather unexpected result for the SEM concerns attitudes towards cultural and religious diversity. Although the SEM respondents did not consider diversity as a priority in the education of their children, compared to Europe, they had more positive expectations from diversity for the prosperity of society, scoring 83% versus 82%. Turks were the most favourable (88%), followed by Jordan (85%). Egypt was the least favourable (78%) in the SEM but it is important to note that this percentage is actually higher than the views coming from Belgium (76%) or Denmark (72%), two countries that are normally considered to be very liberal and open to diversity. Favourable respondents in Tunisia and Morocco were 81%. The ranking of SEM countries in terms of most/least supportive of diversity, however, changed slightly when the question reverted around the scenario of passing values onto children. Again, we have Egypt at the bottom (22%) and Turkey towards the top (28%) but respondents from Morocco (42%) appeared actually those valuing most respect for other cultures. The remaining SEM countries scored in the middle (Tunisia 25%, Jordan 23%).

In SEM countries, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon have been the main recipients of people fleeing Syria, experiencing, like European countries, economic and social difficulties associated with rising inflows of refugees as well as economic migrants (Fargues and Fandrich, 2012). Egypt too, besides going through a hard time domestically, on the political and economic fronts, has also faced immigration from Syria and from Libya in the past few years. In turn these latter two countries were previously recipients of Iraqi refugees and African migrants. We should thus interpret negative attitudes to diversity not just as value statements; but try to understand them through the specific contexts in which they are expressed.

Perhaps unexpectedly, family solidarity is a value around which there is convergence across the whole Euro-Med region. This value featured as number one both in the SEM (52%) and in Europe (60%) during the 2012 Poll. The second position went to: respect for other cultures in Europe, and to religious beliefs in the SEM. These findings do confirm the (predictable) importance

of religion in SEM societies. Yet they simultaneously indicate, in line with the results analysed above regarding the role of religion there is not as dominant as one would expect. In addition, it is somewhat surprising to note that family values are appreciated in Europe more than in SEM countries.

Each round of surveys consistently shows that those countries that are more attached to religious values are less interested in respect for other cultures, and vice versa and diversity slightly decreases in importance in Europe as we move from 2009 to 2012 but simultaneously acquires more significance in the SEM. We note a considerable convergence across the Euro-Med region around key values and very sensitive topics. As we go from 2009 to 2012 we note a reduction of polarisations in terms of values among countries. Median figures begin to prevail instead of very high or very low peaks. The common importance attributed to family values by all the people of the Euro-Med suggests that basic and intimate human relations associated with kindness, solidarity, mutual care and respect count more in the region than ideological or theological positions. Overall we have observed that religious values are a hidden but central theme running through the lives and concerns of the people living in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

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