



**Inauguration Speech by H.E. Anna Lindh
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden
On the Occasion of the Inauguration of
the Swedish Institute in Alexandria
3 October 2000**

Ahlan wa sahlan bikum fi al-ma'had al-suwidi bil-Iskandaria

Sayidati wa sadati,
Dear Amr Moussa,
Excellencies, distinguished guests,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today – in this historic city, in the company of my colleague Amr Moussa – to inaugurate the Swedish Institute in Alexandria.

The idea of setting up a Swedish Institute in Alexandria has been discussed for many years. The idea has now become reality. Thank you Amr Moussa for your encouragement and kind assistance. You and your staff have played a crucial role. I also wish to thank the Governor of Alexandria, Mr Mahgoub, for his support. Last but not least, thank you Sverker Åström for conducting the study that formed the basis for the Government's decision to establish the Institute.

For centuries Sweden has had many and varied contacts with the Middle East and North Africa. Last week I opened an exhibition at the Royal Library in Stockholm – a chronicle of a long-standing relationship between Swedes and the peoples of the Middle East, beginning with the Vikings who returned home astounded, to tell of the cultures they had encountered.

This cultural appreciation was not always mutual: The Arab traveler and writer Ibn Fadlan was more shocked than amazed by the Swedish Vikings' hygiene and eating and drinking habits when he met them in the 10th century.

Despite this, trade and other contacts developed: There is no country in the world where more Arabic coins from this period has been found than in Sweden. Official Swedish-Egyptian trading relations date back to 1345 when the Swedish King and the Sultan in Cairo agreed on the export of Swedish hunting falcons to Egypt.

In recent times our relations with the region have taken on new dimensions. Today about one in every fifty Swedes has his or her origins in the Middle East and North Africa. The cultures of this region are becoming part of Swedish culture.

Islam has taken its place as a Swedish religion – larger than Catholicism. Earlier this year I attended the inauguration of Stockholm's first mosque. There is also a Coptic Church in Sweden – visited in 1994 by the Patriarch Baba Shanuda.

Egyptian writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Nawal al Sgadawi – two of my personal favourites, find many readers in Sweden.

The Middle East cuisine is among the trendiest in Stockholm – as is Arabic music such as Rai. Immigrants have definitely brought us closer to this region. At the same time I have to admit that I feel ashamed of how bad the immigrants are sometimes received at the Swedish labour market.

Another dimension has developed as we became neighbours when Sweden entered the European Union. When the Barcelona Declaration was signed in 1995, it was the first time ever that countries on both sides of the Mediterranean assembled with a view to solving problems together. We see a connection to ongoing cooperation around the Baltic Sea. I think contacts between these two regional networks could enrich and stimulate both processes.

Dear friends,

Throughout much of our eventful history Jews, Christians and Muslims have exercised immense influence upon another and one another's imaginations. As the balance of power has shifted back and forth, the cultures have shown a dark side when they have sought to dominate one another, and have been most successful and constructive when inspired by one another.

History clearly shows the risks of confrontation but also many good examples of co-existence – for example from Egypt and from Muslim Spain where Arabs, Christians and Jews enriched one another. Alhambra, Almodóvar and Andaluz music are but a few instances of the traces the Arab left in Spain. I find it very fascinating that, what many would call the essence of European civilization – the cultural heritage from ancient Greece – the works of Plato and Aristotle, were made known in Europe by Arabic scholars in Spain. The universities and the culture of universities, so important for the development of Europe, were an Arabic influence. We should learn from history to tackle today's problems and crisis.

Today, in the Middle East, the peace process is now at a critical juncture. I am shocked by the recent violence and killings which must immediately be stopped. Sweden and the EU are following the events very closely. Political will is needed on both sides as well as

firm commitment from the rest of the world. Egypt is playing a key role in the search for a just and durable peace, and in the different question on the future of Jerusalem. The issue of the holy places in Jerusalem is an open conflict between religions and we can see such tensions in other parts of the world as well.

“People are enemies of that of which they are ignorant” said Ali Ibn Abi Talib, Mohammed’s cousin and son-in-law, back in the 7th century. It is crucial to stop the mutual demonizing between Christianity and Islam that we sometimes meet – misperceptions based mainly on misunderstandings, lack of knowledge and political exploitation of the ignorance. There is a fear for Islam in the Western world which frightens me, and which has an echo in the Islamic world. The diversity within the religions are greater than the differences between them.

We must prevent suspicions from gaining ground and try to identify and overcome obstacles to mutual respect. Prejudice can only be met by enlightenment, personal experience and confidence-building dialogue. The aim of our dialogue should be to strengthen universal values such as tolerance and understanding, democracy and human rights.

Dialogue can take many forms. Just as the fantastic tales from A Thousand and One Nights traveled from India, Iran, Iraq and Egypt all over the world, the books about Schezerezade’s Swedish sister Pippi Long-Stocking, the strongest girl in the world, is now read by children in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi-Arabia.

Cultural differences are not bad in themselves. Creativity, hence progress, is often born of the interaction between different values and ideas.

It was in this spirit that the Swedish Government in 1995 hosted a major conference on relations between European and Islamic Cultures, and of the situation of Moslems in Europe. It was in this spirit that Egypt and Sweden together initiated a conference on dialogue between cultures and civilizations two years ago.

We hope that the establishment of the Swedish Institute in Alexandria may contribute to carry these initiatives further, as well as to facilitating dialogue in other areas of mutual concern such as peace and security, the environment, water supply and the rights of the child.

As the great Iranian poet Firdawsi said: “The Powerful is the one with knowledge”.

Thank you

Shoukran Gazilan