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## **0. Executive summary**

One of the key activities of the MERID project was to lay or consolidate the framework preconditions in the Middle East, establish optimal framework conditions for international cooperation and increase coordination between policies and programs. In this context, MERID Task 3.3 consisted of organizing at least four bilateral policy dialogue meetings with policy officials and decision makers in Brussels and/or selected countries in the Middle East – particularly Iraq and Iran, given that at the start of the project, there were no framework conditions for international cooperation between the EU and these countries.

By the start of 2016, however, the situation for Iran had changed. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was implemented in January 2016, and shortly after, the EU and Iran signed a set of Joint Statements. Whereas Task 3.3's aim was to pave the way towards a formal policy dialogue and set the main priorities for future cooperation, the JCPOA and the EU-Iran Joint Statements meant those aims had largely been reached.

We therefore adapted the format and approach to the MERID bilateral dialogues: we chose an informal, bottom-up model that involved holding numerous bilateral meetings with the (potential) beneficiaries of the cooperation (mainly scientists and researchers themselves) in order to understand their experiences, assess progress on the framework conditions, and identify remaining obstacles. In doing so, we addressed the high-level political developments between the EU and Iran, gathering considerable input on the on-the-ground conditions of cooperation, and also complemented the methodology used by other MERID project members (which was based largely on document reviews and information collected by local project partners).

In the case of Iraq, ongoing shifts in the country's STI structure, coupled with safety concerns, meant no meetings or events were organized in the country in the context of the MERID project. Nevertheless, bilateral discussions were held with Iraqi participants whenever they participated in MERID events, allowing us to engage with Iraqi policymaking and scientific communities despite the lack of formal events in the country.

In total, bilateral meetings were held with some 57 persons at three different events. The findings from these meetings were analysed and categorized across various levels, allowing us to identify obstacles and opportunities at the personal, institutional and national/framework level, as well as a set of horizontal obstacles and opportunities.

From these findings, we created a set of short-term and immediate recommendations which we believe will complement the longer-term recommendations made in other deliverables of the MERID project. It is vital to sustain and capitalize on the excitement and eagerness to establish research and academic collaborations between Iran and the EU that cumulated in the 'EU-Iran Higher Education and Research Event' held in Tehran in July 2017, and we suggest avenues that will help to do so.

The following report describes the methodology employed for the bilateral policy dialogues, the events at which the bilateral activities were carried out, the findings of our meetings, and the recommendations we draw from these findings. An annex containing the list of the bilateral meetings concludes.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The MERID project and Task 3.3 (Bilateral Activities)

As described in the project proposal, the MERID project was designed as “the first attempt to systematize support to the policy dialogue and involvement of research communities of Iran and Iraq in the H2020 program, as well as an initiative that seeks to give continuity to collaboration frameworks already established between the EU and Middle East countries.” MERID aims to enhance direct cooperation among researchers and foster joint research projects and initiatives between Iran and Iraq with the EU. To do so, a key activity of the project is laying the framework preconditions in the region, establishing optimal framework conditions for international cooperation and increasing coordination between policies and programs.

Among the series of on-line and in-person activities designed to achieve these objectives are a set of bilateral policy dialogues, which were defined as follows at the start of the MERID project [emphasis added]:

**Task 3.3:** Organization and implementation of bilateral activities  
WP3 will organize at least four bilateral policy dialogue meetings with policy officials and decision makers in Brussels and/or selected countries in the Middle East, particularly Iraq and Iran because there are currently no framework conditions for international cooperation between the EU and these countries. Depending on the specific Middle East partner, **the purpose of these meetings will be to enhance and/or pave the way towards establishing a formal policy dialogue and setting the main priorities for future cooperation.** These meetings will be conducted on the margins of other events and activities, thus rationalizing the costs and maximizing the cost-benefit of these meetings.

## 1.2 Changes to the formal policy context with Iran

Shortly after the official start of the MERID project, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed. Its implementation, on 16 January 2016, opened a new chapter in EU-Iran relations. By 16 April 2016, EU High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP) Federica Mogherini met Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Tehran, signing a Joint Statement.

A number of shared and overarching objectives were declared as vital for the promotion of EU- Iran relations, including “developing cooperative relations in areas of mutual interest to benefit the economic development, human rights, prosperity and well-being of the people of Iran and the EU”. Science, Research and Innovation, as well as Education, were marked as two of these areas of mutual interest:

### ***Science, Research and Innovation***

*The two sides will foster further the science, research and innovation cooperation between the EU and Iran, including through stepping up Iran’s participation in the EU Research and Innovation Programme Horizon 2020 and its complementary Euratom Programme. They will encourage setting up partnerships with EU counterparts, knowledge-sharing, mobility of researchers, participation in collaborative research activities in various areas. They will share experience in the areas of technology and innovation. For this a separate joint statement on science, technology, research and innovation was agreed between Commissioner Carlos Moedas and his counterpart, Dr. Mohammad Farhadi the Iranian Minister for Science, Research and Technology and Dr. Sorena Sattari the Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Iran for Science and Technology.*

### ***Education***

*Acknowledging the importance of developing the human dimension of EU-Iran relations, the two sides intend to further deepen their cooperation in the field of higher education. To this effect, it is recalled that the EU has earmarked an additional budget of EUR 3 million for Erasmus+ actions, to be used for cooperation with Iran in 2016 and 2017. The two sides will expand the possibilities for Iranian higher education institutions to participate in the Jean Monnet action for European integration studies. They also intend to organize relevant academic events and fairs, in Tehran towards the end of 2016 to foster cooperation between our universities and promote the participation of Iranian students and researchers and academic staff in EU programmes, particularly Erasmus+ and the Marie Skłodowska Curie action. The EU will also explore ways to allow for Iranian students to participate in Erasmus+ "credit mobility" action, which consists of short-term mobility to European and Iranian universities.*

Carlos Moedas, the Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation also joined the Iran visit, and a specific *Joint Statement on Science, Technology, Research, and Innovation* was signed. This document highlights opportunities and specific cooperation actions to enhance the EU-Iranian research and innovation cooperation and science and technology, diplomacy, including under the EU Horizon 2020 program.

Through the EU-Iran Joint Statements, **a formal policy dialogue had thus been established, and priorities for future cooperation had been set.** It therefore became necessary to adapt the original format and approach to the MERID bilateral dialogues to reflect the developments at the high-level.

***A note on Iraq:*** While the policy dialogue with Iran was advancing rapidly, the situation with Iraq was different. Iraq is facing many challenges in its STI. On the one hand, its intellectual infrastructure was heavily damaged in years of war and sanctions. On the other hand, its national STI structure (governing bodies and institutions) is undergoing substantial change at the moment. The Iraqi policy plan for STI (which was drafted in 2015 by a task force comprising MHESR, MoST, MIM, and UNESCO Office of Iraq) has not yet been endorsed by the Government of Iraq (GOI) and therefore not put into implementation. Hence, there is no visible central STI governing structure in Iraq. Moreover the two main research and innovation institutions, MoST and MHESR, are undergoing a lengthy merging process. Due to these considerations, as well as safety concerns, no visits to Iraq were organized in the context of the MERID project. Nevertheless, where Iraqi policymakers or scientists participated at the MERID events discussed above, every opportunity was taken to engage in bilateral conversations.

### **1.3 Links with other tasks and deliverables of the MERID project**

This report builds on completed and ongoing work carried out by MERID project partners, particularly on Work Package 2, which provided a review of the state-of-the-art and a comprehensive analysis of the RDI governance systems in Middle East. More specifically, Deliverables 2.1 *Background Papers* and D2.2 *Comprehensive Stocktaking Report of Research Governance in the ME*, were employed for contextualization and preparation of meetings and interviews conducted for Task 3.3. Moreover, our final recommendations carefully consider the results of D3.1 *Action Plan and Concrete Support Activities to Policy Dialogue at Bilateral and Regional Levels*, D3.4 Annex III: *Obstacles to Cooperation between EU and Middle East Researchers & Recommendations for Corrective Actions*, as well as the working draft of D2.5 *Future EU\_ME Cooperation Opportunities: Recommendations for an Enhanced EU-ME STI Cooperation*.

In what follows we will discuss the methodology employed for the bilateral policy dialogues, the events at which the bilateral activities were carried out, the findings of our meetings, and the recommendations we draw from these findings. An annex containing the list of the bilateral meetings concludes this report.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 An informal, bottom-up model

Given that the original approach for task 3.3 – which was structured around organizing four bilateral policy dialogue meetings with policy makers and decision makers – was no longer appropriate after the formal policy dialogue had commenced, we decided to change the format of the task to ensure higher impact and relevance of the outcomes. We adopted **an informal, bottom-up model**, holding numerous bilateral meetings with the (potential) beneficiaries of the cooperation, mainly scientists and researchers themselves, in order to understand their experiences, assess progress on the framework conditions, and identify remaining obstacles. In addition to addressing the high-level political developments between the EU and Iran, our approach also complements the methodology employed by the other relevant work conducted by the MERID project, which is largely based on document reviews and data collected by local project partners. Our findings and recommendations, therefore, add value to the comprehensive work of the project by focusing on the immediate personal concerns and reflections of the researchers we conversed with.

In order to ensure alignment with the rest of the work undertaken in the MERID project and to rationalize the costs of this task while maximizing its cost-benefit, we conducted our meetings on the margins of other MERID events. We spoke bilaterally, either informally or formally, with just under 60 persons at the following four activities organized during MERID events:

- a roundtable at the MERID Regional Event ‘Migration, Diaspora and Brain Circulation – Drivers for EU-Mediterranean Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation’ held in Barcelona on May 12-13, 2016;
- a panel discussion and a small group discussion on the sidelines of the MERID regional event ‘Towards Enhancing Framework Conditions for Cooperation between the European Union and the Middle East’ held in Beirut on December 1-2, 2016; and
- on the sidelines of the ‘EU-Iran Higher Education and Research Event’ held in Tehran on July 3-4, 2017.

Through discussions with the scientists and academics (both from the EU and Iran/Iraq), we were able to gather considerable input on the on-the-ground conditions of cooperation.

### 2.2 Summary of the bilateral meetings

**Event 1:** MERID Regional Event ‘Migration, Diaspora and Brain Circulation – Drivers for EU-Mediterranean Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation’

**Date:** May 12-13, 2016

**Place:** Barcelona, Spain

**Bilateral activity:** Roundtable discussion on the identification and removal of concrete obstacles for cooperation in research and innovation

**Description:** This event consisted of a full-day conference on May 12th, titled “Migration, Diaspora and Brain Circulation – Drivers for EU-Mediterranean Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation”, which was held simultaneously with EMUNI’s Annual Conference; and a roundtable discussion on May 13th, which tackled the identification and removal of concrete obstacles for cooperation in research and innovation between the EU and the Middle Eastern countries. At this roundtable discussion, the MERID participants and guests tackled the identification and removal of obstacles for cooperation in research and innovation between the EU and the Middle Eastern countries. In this intimate setting with a limited number of participants, Abdelhamid El-Zoheiry

(EMUNI), Kyriaki Papageorgiou (ESADE), Tanya Dimitrova (European Commission), Mouin Hamze (CNRS) and George Bonas (CeRISS) led the participants in an open, frank and dynamic discussion of the concrete obstacles they are experiencing in cooperating with the EU. Participants and discussions leaders also offered suggestions for removal of these obstacles.

**Event 2:** MERID Regional Event ‘Towards Enhancing Framework Conditions for Cooperation between the European Union and the Middle East’

**Date:** December 1-2, 2016

**Place:** Beirut, Lebanon

**Bilateral activities:** (1) Panel discussion on opportunities for cooperation in research in renewable energies with Iranian and Iraqi participants; (2) Small group discussion with Iranian scientists and experts on the sidelines, covering obstacles and opportunities for enhanced EU-Iran cooperation in research and innovation;

**Description:** The aim of this event was to address and discuss the remaining obstacles in cooperation in the field of science and research between the EU and Middle Eastern countries and capitalize on the already existing collaboration frameworks.

The event included into two moderated panel sessions. In the first, experts from Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria shared their experience on intellectual property rights policy, scientific visas and open access arrangements. A second moderated panel discussion focused on technology and innovation transfer and management and cooperation in the field of renewable energy. In this second panel, moderator Marie Vandendriessche (ESADE) led participants, including Iranian and Iraqi scientists and policymakers, in a discussion of the concrete obstacles to and opportunities for research cooperation in the field of renewable energy.

On the sidelines of the event, a second bilateral activity was organized. In a small group discussion, Iranian scientists and experts shared their views on the state of awareness on cooperation opportunities in Iran, opportunities for enhancing research and academic cooperation, and logistic, cultural and other barriers to cooperation and academic mobility.

**Event 3:** ‘EU-Iran Higher Education and Research Event’

**Date:** July 3-4, 2017

**Place:** Tehran, Iran

**Bilateral activity:** Informal sideline discussions with Iranian and EU scientists and academics

**Description:** The ‘EU-IRAN Higher Education and Research Event’ was co-organized by the European Commission, DG EAC and the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research & Technology. This two-day scientific & research event was conceived to pave the way for extending Iran-European Union cooperation through increased bilateral involvement of higher education institutions, research institutes and other organizations in the EU programs, addressing challenges and needs in terms of higher education, research and innovation, such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. The two-day event was attended by high-level EU and Iranian officials, as well as university rectors and vice rectors, researchers and academics, from 21 European countries and from Iran. During both days, two ESADE researchers engaged, on the sidelines, in informal discussions with the attending researchers and academics in order to explore their experiences with and expectations of EU-Iran cooperation in research and education.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Obstacles and opportunities at the personal level**

##### *Existing collaborations*

- Participants emphasized the importance of having studied in Europe, as well as short visits to establish contacts.
- However, generally speaking, the current short-term educational exchanges do not result in long-term collaborations.
- Members of the diaspora, as well as contacts from Erasmus Mundus or PhD stays in Europe were deemed critical contacts – but not sufficient on their own. The contacts need to expand to the department, and institutional support needs to be provided.

##### *Desired collaborations*

- Participants expressed interest in international work placements (2-12 months).
- It was suggested that grants for proposal preparation would be helpful.

##### *Networking*

- Many/most participants had not heard of the existence of an NCP.
- Iranian academics noted the poor response rate by EU researchers to contacts they initiated.
- Participants noted difficulties in identifying the most appropriate partners for consortia in the EU.

##### *Procedural/administrative*

- The application forms and processes for EU research calls (such as MSCA, or Jean Monnet) were often found to be overwhelming.

#### **3.2 Obstacles and opportunities at the institutional level**

##### *Support to the application procedure*

- Many researchers expressed a need for information/assistance on procedural aspects (how to register for a PIC, where to find information on the website, what forms to fill out).
- Many researchers asked to see examples of successful applications, to understand what makes a proposal successful.

##### *Others*

- There is a lack of resources within universities and research centers that would enable information dissemination within the institutions.
- There is a strong desire for collaboration in the field of health.

### **3.3 Obstacles and opportunities at the national/framework level**

#### *Existing collaborations*

- Sweden was a very active player in cooperation with Iran and has quite a lot of experience. This cooperation started bilaterally, with existing ties now being incorporated into EU frameworks and programs.

#### *Procedural/administrative*

- Differences in the accreditation systems for professors between Iran and European countries make cooperation more difficult.
- Financial transfer issues are acute and a true barrier to enhanced EU-Iran cooperation.
- Moreover, the administrative and financial systems between the EU and the Middle East are often incompatible.
- There are three Iranian universities under sanctions, which impedes cooperation.

#### *Others*

- Participants expressed the need for NCPs to work on research cooperation issues full-time, rather than on the side.
- Visa issues, including how Iranians seeking academic mobility are treated by foreign embassies, and long queues at embassies.
- Due to the sanctions regime, there is a lack of experience in international collaboration.

### **3.4 Horizontal obstacles and opportunities**

#### *Desired collaborations*

- Researchers expressed a wish to enter into existing projects as observers/self-funded participants.

#### *Procedural/administrative*

- One clear issue is the unfamiliarity with competitive grant making.
- The terminology involved (basic terms such as *call*, *proposal*, *consortium*, but also acronyms such as *FP7*, *SC6*, etc.) creates an important initial hurdle.
- Participants offered the idea that thematic workshops could be organized, featuring firms or organizations that have cooperated in EU programs in the past and can share their experiences.

#### *Intercultural issues*

- Practical difficulties: the Iranian weekend is Thursday and Friday, while the European weekend is Saturday and Sunday.
- Cultural differences and the legacy of Iran's isolation can affect interactions. This works two ways:
  - o On the one hand, some Iranians still mistrust the EU. Some also feel that there is a lack of appreciation/understanding of Iran's current scientific capacities.
  - o On the other hand, while many Europeans theoretically like the idea of cooperating with Iran, many still have fears over security, etc.

## 4. Recommendations

Based on our bottom-up approach and face-to-face contacts and observations, we emphasize the importance of sustaining and capitalizing on the excitement and eagerness to establish research and academic collaborations between Iran and the EU that cumulated in the ‘EU-Iran Higher Education and Research Event’ held in Tehran in July 2017.

Our recommendations, therefore, are short-term and immediate, and are grounded on our formal and informal discussions with various stakeholders. It is important to note here that the MERID project has other deliverables that formulate recommendations based on policy reviews and the framework conditions.

### *Language-related recommendations*

- There is clearly unfamiliarity with competitive grantmaking and its terminology. This could be remedied through (a) a short and clear introduction to the concept of competitive grantmaking when presenting in Iran, and (b) an introduction to basic EU H2020 terminology (e.g. work program, calls, proposals, consortium).
- The terminology should also be adapted to some degree when presenting to external partner countries: excessive acronyms (e.g. FP7, SC-6) should be avoided, and the language used should be simplified. It would also be important to find local words that relate to the terminology used by the EU.

### *Recommendations on capacity-building and trainings*

- *National level:* It is important to design and implement a training module for the NCPs. NCPs would then spread the knowledge and skills they receive to different institutions through a network of focal points.
- *Institutional level:*
  - o In line with good practices in other countries such as Egypt, a network of geographical focal points could be established within universities & research centers. This network could be supported by the NCPs and other institutions.
  - o Some of the specific points to focus on at the institutional/focal point level are: teaching on procedural matters, such as how to register for PIC, and dealing with the EU programs’ financial regulations.
  - o Encourage participation in institutional twinning actions between the EU and Middle East.
- *Personal level:*
  - o There is a very specific set of writing tools and procedures for EU proposals. These need to be disseminated to new potential partners who are not familiar with them. Proposal writing trainings should focus on the way EU proposals are structured, for example in H2020 with Work Packages, Tasks, Deliverables and Milestones.
  - o Language training – to improve use of English language, but also EU terminology, as signaled above.

### *Recommendations on networking*

- To break the cycle of mutual distrust, more exchanges will be vital. These could include:
  - o Networking/brokerage events to establish contacts & build networks between ME & EU researchers.
  - o Short-term visits for researchers, policymakers, and officers/NCPs/focal points (for officers, exchange best practices on project management, financial regulations, etc.)

- o Opening up exiting projects to enable new partners such Iran to gain knowledge by becoming observing participants.
- Institutions should furthermore work to capitalize on personal contacts established through such exchanges.

*Recommendations on the NCP system / framework conditions*

- Here, we would like to refer to the recommendations made in the working draft of D2.5 *Future EU\_ME Cooperation Opportunities: Recommendations for an Enhanced EU-ME STI Cooperation,*” particularly regarding the points on NCPs. We cannot stress enough the importance of these figures, and likewise support the views expressed on the scientific diaspora.
- Given the short-term focus of the recommendations in the present report, we also call attention to D2.5 for presenting a mid- and long-term impact analysis that complements our focus.
- We would like to point out, nevertheless, the framework conditions that were brought up most often by participants in our bilateral dialogues. These were: difficulties with scientific visas, financial transfers, and the alignment of research priorities between the various levels and parties.