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Anna Lindh Forum with civil society, armed with dialogue

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(ANSAMed) - LA VALLETTA - While Syria, Iraq and Libya continue their inferno of wars, in which defeating ISIS is just one of the things at stake - in Malta hundreds of young people and representatives from civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean region are discussing how to overcome and move beyond the "narrative" of extremism, with the new generations on the front lines.

This is one of the main themes at the heart of the agenda for the Anna Lindh Foundation's MedForum 2016, which has brought together about 650 participants in Malta to talk about fighting violent radicalism as well as intercultural cities as "potential dialogue incubators".

Other topics include values-centred education to help prevent misunderstandings and conflicts; the Euro-Med area as an extraordinary hub for exchange and meeting in a "society 3.0"; support for creative entrepreneurship that has its beginnings in civil society; and the roles that the media, women, art, and migrants can play.

"The voice of young people for fighting extremism is growing," said Elisabeth Guigou, president of the Anna Lindh Foundation, at Monday's plenary session, during which the "Young Mediterranean Voices" programme was launched.

That programme is the evolution of the "Young Arab Voices" programme, which involved tens of

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thousands of young people in initiatives for training and dialogue as well as public debate in civil society.

However, mobility and exchange between youth in the Euro-Med area are in stark contrast to a difficult reality that bucks this trend, in which migrant influxes and fears of terrorist infiltration seem to compete for closing borders rather than opening them.

"We don't want our countries to become isolated or Europe to become a fortress," Gigou said, announcing the Foundation's commitment to find "legal ways for youth mobility" and the extension of the Erasmus programme "to the southern Mediterranean as well".

UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova highlighted the importance of fighting extremism starting at the school desk, honing teachers' skills in order to bring long-term results, especially urgent now given current conditions facing child migrants and refugees.

Bokova said at least half of these children don't have the opportunity to attend school, with the risk of creating a "lost generation".

Maltese Foreign Minister George Vella said Malta can be an efficient "catalyst" in the meeting between the European and Arab worlds.

"We shouldn't speak 'to' young people but 'with' young people," he said.

He said the upcoming Maltese presidency of the Council of the EU will focus on migration with particular attention on influxes from Africa, under the pressure of dramatic environmental and developmental problems.

A meeting in February will be dedicated to this topic, taking stock of the European investment programme launched at the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015.

But the true spirit of the Forum is in the busy calendar of seminars and themed workshops taking place over these three days, concluding on Tuesday in Malta.

A workshop on how to fight extremism on the web and on social media through campaigns and "positive" messages promoted by civil society groups in diverse local contexts, from Tunisia to Algeria to Egypt, opened events on Sunday.

It was presented by London's Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Brian Fishman, Facebook Lead Policy Manager for Counterterrorism.

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